Ponniyin Selvan

Sword of Slaughter

3

Kalki

Translated by
Pavithra Srinivasan

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Ponniyin Selvan

Book 3: Sword of Slaughter

Kalki R Krishnamurthy

Translated from the Tamil by Pavithra Srinivasan

ZERO DEGREE PUBLISHING

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Publishers' Note

Writers are the cultural identity, the memory of the aeon, the conscience and the voice of the society. By the sheer magic of their art, they surpass the barriers of language, land and culture. Any country should pride itself on possessing writers – national assets – whose works in translation have the potential to catapult them into international renown.

The Latin American Boom during the 1960s and '70s was a launchpad era that thrust names such as Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Luis Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa into the Anglophone literary world where they enjoyed a plausive reception.

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Zero Degree Publishing aims to introduce to the world some of the finest specimens of modern Indian literature, to begin with, we take great pride in introducing Tamil literature in English translation because, as Henry Gratton Doyle said, "It is better to have read a great work of another culture in translation than never to have read it at all."

– Gayathri Ramasubramanian & Ramjee Narasiman

Publishers

Dedication

To Kalki R Krishnamurthy—who first opened my eyes to the wonderful world of history, and guided my first hesitating steps towards the incredible world of historical fiction. From you I learnt my past; through you, I look to my future.

-Pavithra Srinivasan

1

At Kodikkarai

There's an old saying in Tamil:

"Kalluli mangan pona vazhi,

Kaadu malaiyellaam thavidu podi!"

Certain irresistible forces of nature always wrecked their surroundings; destroyed structures natural and manmade without the slightest compunction; to stop them would be to tempt the attentions of a rampaging elephant. The whirlwinds that churned the sea were wildly successful as they ravaged the coastline of Chozha Nadu, battering everything in their path. Earthly damage wrought by heavenly Vayu Bhagavan wielding the forces of nature as if they were his personal playthings was obvious from Kodikkarai to Kaverippoompattinam: trees lay uprooted everywhere, their broken branches upended, leaves torn; homes had lost entire roofs lifted by the swift gales, thrown elsewhere and reduced to rubble while the walls stood forlorn, bereft of support. Kodikkarai lay submerged under so much water that it seemed the very ocean had poured in—except for one area that gave the lie: the white sands that partitioned sea and land. This stretch of the beach was very much as it had been except for the boggy mires which now brimmed with water, much deeper than before. Man or beast might step in only at the risk of death; whole elephants could be swallowed by these terrible quagmires and meet a muddy end! These marshes were nature's coffins, ready to take unguarded life at any moment.

Two days after the whirlwinds' dance of fury saw Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his considerable entourage make an appearance at Kodikkarai. Duly followed a shrouded palanquin but unlike previous occasions, it was the Ilaiya Rani herself who travelled within, in state. There was no need to bring Madhuranthaka Thevar in secret and besides, it seemed imperative to have Nandhini occupy the palanquin

upon judicious occasions—the easier then, to ferry the prince without arousing the slightest suspicion when it proved necessary. Pazhuvettarayar, naturally, accepted and approved of his queen's strategy with alacrity: an old man drugged with lust, mired in the cloying, velvety darkness of desire, of *kaamaanthakaaram* itself, was it any surprise that he snatched at any opportunity to have that beauty with no equal in the world—*bhuvanamohini*—with him?

They managed to arrive and set camp in Nagapattinam before the whirlwinds struck; the *Dhanaadhikaari* made sure to carry out a few official duties, first.

***

Naagai was, in those times, one of the more important Chozha ports, witnessing trade and export of numerous products through massive ships, on an impressive scale. Smaller craft plied the sea between them and shore, transporting men and more. Many were the officials vested with power to levy duty and collect tax on these goods; was it not the Chozha *Dhanaadhikaari* Periya Pazhuvettarayar's bounden duty—indeed, privilege —to supervise them and ensure the correct performance of tasks?

Once this obligation was carried out to his satisfaction, the elder Pazhuvettarayar made his ponderous way to the Choodamani Buddha Viharam where resident monks accorded him a welcome in keeping with his high estate. The Guardian of Chozha Treasury and Granaries enquired if they were comfortable, and if the monastery possessed the necessities to function. The monks assured him on both counts, begging him to convey their gratitude to Emperor Sundara Chozhar.

Two *bikshus* from this selfsame *viharam* had visited Thanjai earlier; gained audience with the Chakravarthy, and expressed their monastery's heartfelt hope that the Lord of the Realm might recover his customary good health. Opportunity was promptly seized to discuss Ponniyin Selvar's patronage of the Buddhist cause in Ilankai; the illustrious Mahasangam, revealed the monks, had professed enormous satisfaction and exhilarated delight at the prince's efforts to renovate ruined, crumbling monasteries. "We wish to convey another wondrous news, Sire: rumour is that a majority of Ilankai's *bikshus* wish to confer the

throne of Ilankai upon your younger son, Arulmozhi Varmar, favoured of the Gods, thus making him the Emperor. Negotiations amongst them have already begun to that effect," admitted the *bikshus* with every sign of happiness. "Pray, what further proof is needed of our beloved prince's merit?"

A rather peculiar notion occurred to Periya Pazhuvettarayar as he stood listening to this effusion and once the monks took their leave, he began, by slow degrees, to communicate this to Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy. "I beg leave to open a subject of great import, Lord of the Three Worlds," he started, portentously. "Your rule extends in all eight directions, my gracious liege; there is no one on earth, on this vast *bhoomandalam* who does not bow to your illustrious authority. And yet," he shook his head mournfully. "And yet, Sire, there are two who refuse—I refer to your respected sons, of course. It cannot be said that the fault is all theirs; I am in a position to know that they are advised grievously ill by men in positions of great influence in the Chozha *mahasamrajyam*. Aditha Karikalar refuses to visit you and instead, sends palm-leaves asking *you* to Kanchi! I daresay it would astonish you, Sire, if I revealed that this most unfilial behavior may be traced directly to the machinations of your father-in-law, Thirukkovilur Malayaman. As for your beloved younger son, countless the palm-leaves; endless the men sent to Eezham in a vain bid to reclaim him and I am well-nigh exhausted of conveying your commands to return. Neither orders nor palm-leaves have reached the prince Sire, and the blame for that may be laid directly at the door of the treacherous Kodumbalur Periya Velaan. This ought to be the only rational explanation, Your Majesty; would the prince, your beloved son, tarry even a moment, having been bidden by you to return forthwith? And that, Sire, has given me the smidgeon of an idea," Pazhuvettarayar made a show of hesitation. "I shall reveal it—subject to your majesty's gracious permission, of course."

His Majesty having duly accorded his gracious permission, the *Dhanaadhikaari* continued: "A royal command shall be issued to arrest the prince on the grounds of having conspired to seize the throne of Ilankai," he put forth a startlingly *Devi*ous plan. "It will not be in Boodhi Vikrama Kesari's power to refuse to forward such a message; we shall send envoys directly to Arulmozhi Varmar, just in case." Pazhuvettarayar paused, primly. "His highness could certainly not ignore such an express command, either."

A faint, rather sardonic smile appeared on Sundara Chozhar's withered countenance. Well, why not? A supremely daring ruse to be sure, founded on a truly strange premise—but why not set it in motion? The Chakravarthy's aging heart overflowed with the wish—nay, desperate need to see his youngest born; instinct whispered that his days were numbered. There was no time to be lost; his *manoradham*, his greatest ambition regarding the throne ought to be communicated to the one he cherished above all, before it was too late. Arulmozhi was the son of his heart, his most beloved, and would raise no objection, he felt sure, once he realized that Sundara Chozhar was in deadly earnest about wishing to bequeath the Thanjai throne to Madhuranthaka Thevar. And then, it would be no great difficulty to use Arulmozhi's convincing arguments to change Aditha Karikalan's mind.

The result of these ruminations ended in the Chakravarthy setting the royal seal of approval upon the *Dhanaadhikaari*'s initiative; this proved the basis for the warrant seeking the prince's arrest. The ship's captain was summoned and ordered, most straitly, to deliver his highness to the capital without a mark on his sacred person.

***

It was only after two large Chozha vessels had taken possession of said warrant and actually set sail for Eezham did Periya Pazhuvettarayar feel the first, faint qualms of disquiet. Should some disaster befall the prince—God forbid!—his would be the first name tainted; him upon whom blame automatically fastened. But stay … perhaps he could journey to Nagapattinam and welcome Arulmozhi Varmar in person when his prison ship entered the port. His presence would rob the circumstance of impropriety; he could offer his personal escort to Thanjai.

There were, if he wished to admit it to himself, certain other, lesser motives behind such a seemingly magnanimous gesture; the prince ought not to have the opportunity to seek an audience with either Sembian Maa*Devi* or Kundhavai. If ever there were two women in the kingdom with an unhealthy amount of influence over Arulmozhi Varmar and an unholy hatred for the Pazhuvettarayars, it had to be them; there was no guarantee that their poisonous words might not twist the prince's sentiments and God forbid if something occurred—Pazhuvettarayar was

wary of specifying *what* this unknown might be, even to himself—before the significant event that was the Emperor's death. Nothing of that sort could be allowed to happen.

Then, there was the stabbing in the back of the sentry posted in the secret passage within the gloomy dungeons … and the *Dhanaadhikaari*'s mind had been plagued by this peculiar incident ever since. Strange, half-formed suspicions flitted through his consciousness; dangerous doubts reared their heads at the oddest times: was it possible that someone else had been concealed within the dungeons? If so, who? Could it—could it have been that wily Vaanar warrior who managed to escape the tightening nets of the Thanjai fort security? If that were true, then he might be in possession of much more information than Pazhuvettarayar had previously thought likely.

Could his brother be right about that strange *mandhiravadhi* often making secret assignations with Nandhini—could that man be a part of all these secret conspiracies? Well, he ought to make a push to know the truth about those as well.

He had been shaken—if he admitted it to himself—that it was *Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai*'s express command that drove Vandhiyathevan hotfoot to the prince, with an *olai*. What on earth had she sent through that wretched boy? Could it be that that little she-snake had learnt, somehow, of the decision made by the Pazhuvettarayar-Sambuvaraiyar coalition in regards to the throne? She could not have written about all those secret meetings in dark, gloomy forts, could she?

Whatever the situation, it was imperative that he, the *Dhanaadhikaari*, meet the prince the moment he touched upon Chozha soil; since the orders for imprisonment included that wretched Vandhiyathevan, a conversation with him too was indicated. Pazhuvettarayar ought to find out what exactly that young man knew and the extent of his knowledge.

These, then, were his grounds for an instant journey and wait at Nagapattinam; Nandhini's motivations were even greater. She, for her part, wished to know the contents of Ilaiya Piratti's *olai* conveyed to the prince through Vandhiyathevan. The desire to see said Vaanar warrior might have lurked underneath as well. Ravidasan was another motivator;

she was desperate to know the success or otherwise of his mission. With this in mind, she trained her exquisitely lovely eyes on her fortunate husband and informed him of her decision to accompany him.

Does one need inducement to devour juicy sugarcanes? The old man was hard put to contain his ecstasy and assented at once. His starved heart began to envisage long, lovely boat rides along the shallow shores of Kodikkarai in the company of his beloved; perhaps these pleasant, romantic interludes might serve to assuage a little of the roaring fire that threatened to burn him, inside and out.

It was as they sojourned in Nagapattinam that the whirlwind struck. The tearing gale and churning waves, rising high as coconut trees delighted Nandhini, who relished nature's tantrums to her heart's content; not so Pazhuvettarayar, who had to swallow his disappointment at the wreckage of his dreams involving pleasure boats and his beloved wife.

Once the whirlwind had blasted itself off the landscape, however, he lost no time in gathering intelligence about the fate of ships and vessels at sea, and the damage they might have possibly sustained. Those who stayed close to shore knew, apparently, of the whirlwind's advent and had taken appropriate measures to save themselves and their crafts. Several *valaignar* fishermen, freshly returned from a fishing expedition gave distressing tidings, however: two ships between Eezham and Kodikkarai had foundered in the sea; one had caught fire, burnt and sunk.

Periya Pazhuvettarayar was hard put to conceal the panic that consumed him—for they could have easily been the ones sent to imprison the prince, couldn't they? What of the prince's fate? Had something befallen him, the blame for such a calamity would descend solely on Pazhuvettarayar himself. Arulmozhi Varmar was, after all, a prince of the people and most beloved of them; what explanation could he possibly offer; what excuse? And what of the Chakravarthy himself, pray? No, he ought to know more; find a way of receiving conclusive news—news that might be forthcoming in Kodikkarai, perhaps.

Hope and the pressing need for relief battled in his heart; the desire to know more increased with every moment. There might be those in Kodikkarai who had seen or heard about the foundered ships; who

knew? There might be survivors too, crawling ashore … yes, Kodikkarai it would be!

Nandhini could not have approved more, when he broached the idea. “Indeed, *Nadha*, I have never seen the place and would now like to —especially after all the tales I’ve heard of its considerable beauty. Do let’s go there, and see for ourselves,” she smiled.

***

Two were the routes that connected Nagapattinam and Kodikkarai: one through water, along a meandering canal that wound close to the sea; the other, through road. Pazhuvettarayar’s entourage being of colossal dimensions, the latter was deemed a better option and besides, Nandhini had her own reasons for choosing thus: the canal would likely allow Pazhuvettarayar to indulge his romantic reflections and begin flowery professions of love; she was not sure she could stomach them. There was another advantage to travelling by road, as she was swift to point out: one could always gather information from small vessels and catamarans beached onto the shore. After all, who would know more about such affairs than boatmen, at home on the sea?

As it turned out, there was not much they gleaned that they did not already know. A few more divulged, however, of having seen two ships, one of which caught fire and sank into the stormy sea.

***

At Kodikkarai, lighthouse-keeper Thyaga Vidangar promised to place his own home at the disposal of the Pazhuvettarayar couple; there was no great mansion that might accommodate so regal a party in this sandy village and he practically begged them to consider his humble abode as their own. Nandhini refused this offer, however, much preferring to set up a tent on the shore for her convenience.

And it was so. In the distance, the rest of the Pazhuvoor entourage raised tents for themselves.

No sooner had camp been established than a large ship appeared upon the horizon, approaching shore with every moment. It made its way

to the beach as close as it possibly could and dropped anchor.

Pazhuvettarayar, who strode out at the first sign of the ship, found his heart thudding with nervous anticipation. Its large sails hung in tatters —a sure sign that it had been caught in the late hurricane. Who were the ship's occupants, for God's sake? Could one of them possibly be the prince? There was no sign of a tiger flag but this was no great issue; it would not have stood a chance in the gale force winds and might have easily been ripped apart.

He lost no time in commandeering the lone boat that hugged the shores and sent it swiftly towards the ship in the hope of news. Those in the vessel seemed to have been expecting said boat for two men disembarked at once—and one was Parthibendra Pallavan.

To go back a bit: Arulmozhi Varmar, who had left the ship in the midst of a heaving hurricane in a bid to save Vandhiyathevan never returned, did he?

The prince's continued absence plunged Parthibendran into a morass of anxiety; he waited for the winds to drop somewhat and when dawn broke, steered his ship here and there, hoping vainly to catch a glimpse of the lost *ilango*. Of the two sailors who accompanied Arulmozhi Varmar towards the burning ship, only one managed to be rescued, in a perilous state. He retailed the prince's valiant rescue of Vandhiyathevan in halting words, and gave them to understand the fate of their boat immediately after.

Parthibendran, listening to this harrowing tale, felt himself grow faint in mingled horror and sorrow. And yet, underneath the concern and fear fluttered the faintest thread of optimism—forlorn yes, but present—that the prince might have been washed ashore at Kodikkarai. It *could* have happened, couldn't it? His heart skipped several beats at the very hope.

In the end, he decided that enquiries at this seaside village presented his best chance and it was with this intention that he dropped anchor. It was only after he had clambered into the convenient boat and almost arrived at shore did he witness the spectacle of Periya Pazhuvettarayar awaiting him in company of the Ilaiya Rani—which annoyed him not a little.

Everything he had heard from Aditha Karikalar of the wiles and guiles of the Young Queen of Pazhuvoor rose in his memory at that moment—but it cannot be denied that underneath the mountain of irritation reared the faint desire to see the woman—actually *see* this so-called beauty, the *mohanangi* who had managed to make even the crown prince lose his considerable wits. He found it difficult to suppress the yearning; in fact, it grew by such leaps and bounds that he would have been extremely disappointed indeed, were he to be denied even a glimpse of the lady.

His fears were without foundation, as it so happened; the moment he set foot on sand, he was escorted to Pazhuvettarayar's presence. The old man stood right regally, hands on his hips, in front of his tent and in that moment, Parthibendran realized just how unfair was his epithet of a doddering *kizhavar*; Pazhuvettarayar's muscled form, level stare and splendidly severe mien were majestic, defying the youth of many a younger man. This indeed, was a *purusha singam*; a lion among men.

Even as his thoughts ruminated upon Pazhuvettarayar and his soldierly stance, a young woman sidled out of the tent behind him.

A dazzling flash of lightning lit up the sky from behind a solid, staid dark cloud. Parthibendran blinked, and realized that this was no lightning —no ordinary lightning, but a golden idol, exquisitely fashioned.

A fragile, dainty creeper wound itself in a sinuous dance around a steady teak, rooted to the ground; Parthibendran caught his stuttering breath as his widened eyes took in this ravishing beauty who strolled around Pazhuvettarayar in such a fashion. She sashayed forward tantalizingly, standing just a little in front of the older man.

Parthibendran tried to steady himself as this vision assaulted all his faculties; as this *bhuvanamohini*, this lovely creature, loveliest in all the worlds, sent his senses reeling. And then, she directed a glance out of her large, bewitching eyes; sharp lances pierced his heart.

"*Nadha*?"

Good God. She was speaking.

“Who might this brave warrior be?” She asked. “I’ve never met him, I believe.”

Dulcet tones, like the delicate trills of a parrot, fell upon his ears with the sweetness of honey. Parthibendran simply stared at her, intoxicated as though he’d indulged in several draughts of wine from golden goblets —and stood as though turned to stone.

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2

Nets of Desire

Men entering the wedded state at an advanced age become permanent residents of a world of illusion, subject to the *maya* of suspicion at all times. They harbour the vilest loathing for anyone who swims into the ocean of their acquaintance; an entirely natural reaction that requires not the slightest provocation.

Pazhuvettarayar had more reason than most to be prey to seething hatred. For one thing, he disliked intensely the way Nandhini put herself forward in a most unbecoming fashion—but not a word could he say in admonishment.

His discontent, therefore, found expression in his answer about Parthibendran: “The world is bursting at the seams with nameless, faceless people, *Rani*,” rumbled his voice, hoarse with annoyance. “There is no way we can see and know every single person, after all—and frankly, that is no great loss.”

“It’s no surprise that the *pattamakishi*, queen to the Lord of the Chozha Treasury shouldn’t know me, *Ayya*; such a great loss is not hers, but mine,” Parthibendran replied with aplomb. “Therefore, I shall introduce myself without further ado.”’ He turned to Nandhini with a flourish. “*Ammani*, I am called Parthibendra Pallavan.”’

“Are you indeed?” wondered Nandhini. “Your name certainly is familiar.”

“Why the insipid introduction, Parthibendra—this sudden, unworthy mentioning of just your name without the slightest reference to your many titles? Upon my word, the very epitome of humility and modesty! Nandhini, my dear, this is no ordinary prince and certainly not just Parthibendran, as he styles himself,” Pazhuvettarayar’s voice rang with sarcasm. “The warrior who stands before you is *He Who Conquered*

Vengi and Kalingam; Lord Parthibendra Pallavan *Who Beheaded the dread Veera Pandiyan*!"

Nandhini's lovely countenance underwent a startling change for just a moment: her radiant face darkened like a roiling storm-cloud; lightning flashed and sparked in her ravishing eyes. The next instant, she was chuckling.

"How many more warriors wander about, claiming to have chopped Veera Pandiyan's hapless head, *Ayya*?" She turned to her husband with an amused expression. "Is there some sort of rule, perhaps—does anyone keep count?"

"*Ammani*, the *Dhanaadhikaari*'s boundless affection prompts him to heap such undeserved epithets upon this petty person but in truth, the credit for beheading Veera Pandiyan belongs to Aditha Karikalar—and him alone."

"Ah, come now, young man," Pazhuvettarayar cackled with ill-concealed ill-humour. "Such humility ill becomes you, a matchless veteran of battle—claim some of the endless credit that goes with pounding a dead snake into pulp." He gave a snort of scorn.

"On the contrary, my lord, Veera Pandiyan was very much alive, a snake in possession of his wits in fact when Aditha Karikalar raised his mighty sword," Parthibendran stared at Pazhuvettarayar without flinching. "But something happened that befuddled the crown prince—an angelic woman, divine as *mohini* from *Devalokham* barred his path and folded her hands in supplication. This peerless beauty begged him to spare Veera Pandiyan's life. Now, had it been me in Karikalar's place …" His words were intended for the old man, but Parthibendran's eyes wandered to Nandhini's charming countenance and scrutinized her keenly. "I would have flung aside my sword; Veera Pandiyan would've dragged himself to freedom," he finished softly.

Realizing that the conversation was drifting into dangerous channels, Nandhini turned to her lord and master. "These old tales have neither meaning nor import now, *Nadha*," she cooed. "Rather, we might enquire the purpose of our new arrival's visit."

“Indeed, yes—there’s no need to rehash ancient history, Thambi,” Pazhuvettarayar acquiesced at once. “Let us have your own tale: when did you start from Kanchi and what is your destination?” He demanded. “And why halt here?”

Parthibendran, hitherto rather inebriated, it must be admitted, from the very sight of Nandhini’s beauty, now recalled his task with some reluctance. “Forgive me, *Ayya*,” he apologized with good grace. “I have been indulging in pointless talk when I ought to be …” he drew a deep breath. “I bear extremely important news—horrifying tidings that will submerge the whole of Chozha Nadu into a sea of despair and sorrow. Prince Arulmozhi Varmar, who did the honour of coming aboard my ship in Eezham and travelling in my company, jumped into sea during the raging whirlwind. I know not his fate and came here, finally, hoping to glean something—wondering if he’d climbed ashore hereabouts–”

“Ah—what did you say?” Pazhuvettarayar’s deep, anguished scream cut through before he could finish. “***What did***—” And he dropped to the ground like a tree felled by a furious storm.

Aghast, Parthibendran sprang forward to bear him—but someone was quicker: Nandhini swiftly placed herself between the two men, brushing away his stretched hand. She sank to her knees beside Pazhuvettarayar and raised his heavy head into her own lap with great gentleness. “Water!” She shrieked, completely focused on her fallen lord. “***Water***!”

A maid duly hurried out from the elaborate tent; a few warriors in the vicinity hastened forward, not to mention the lighthouse-keeper and his family. Nandhini put out a jeweled hand with great majesty, thrusting them all aside. “*Nadha*,” she trilled, sprinkled a few drops of water on his face. “My love?” Her melting voice fluttered, like a nightingale in distress.

The charming call seemed to work; the old man’s eyes opened. Consciousness returned and he sat up abruptly.

“Nandhini,” he whispered, appalled. “Is it true? What I heard just now—this Pallavan mentioned something—about Ponniyin Selvan being taken by the sea—it wasn’t true, was it? Ah, the joy I felt when I held that brave boy, that *veera kumaran* as an infant against these very shoulders

—that sweet prince for whose arrest I sent orders, stamping my own personal seal upon the warrant! *Ayyo*!" Pazhuvettarayar slapped his own forehead, lost in agony. "*Ayyo*, what will the good citizens of Chozha Nadu *think*?" No one, not even Nandhini had seen or heard this lion of a warrior, veteran of a thousand battlefields, abandon himself to grief thus.

"Pray, calm yourself *Nadha*," Nandhini counseled. "He hasn't related the whole of his news, has he? It would be best to decide on a course of action once we've heard everything, I should think."

"Indeed, you are correct—now, Parthibendra, out with it! You delivered news—news that Ponniyin Selvan had drowned—you said he was dead, didn't you? Is this indeed true, or are you playing some sort of malicious prank?" Pazhuvettarayar's eyes glinted in wrath. "The truth now; this is not one of your marvelously embroidered jests, is it? If so, careful—do not rouse a hungry tiger!" He roared.

"Forgive me, *Ayya*, but I didn't say that the prince was dead; like you, I cannot quite believe that Tamilagam would be forced to suffer such a devastating loss. All I mentioned was that he jumped from my ship into the sea when the raging whirlwind was at its wildest. There's a possibility that he could have survived, with God's grace—why, even been washed ashore in these parts. And this, I must say, was why I dropped anchor here—"

"He jumped into the …—*why*? What on earth for?" Pazhuvettarayar demanded, frantic. "Why would he board your ship in the first place—and *what were you doing when he jumped*?"

"*Ayya*, it might be well to begin at the beginning," Nandhini interrupted. "Why not ask him to explain everything, from his reasons for travelling to Ilankai in the first place?"

"Yes, yes of course—tell us the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Else, you cannot escape with your life …" And Pazhuvettarayar, unflinching warrior, ground his teeth so loudly that Parthibendran could not help but hear it.

"I'm not in the habit of being dishonest, my lord; my tongue would not lie even if I wished to," that young man did not turn a hair. "Hark:

news reached Kanchi that you, Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar and certain others had formed a secret alliance against the Chozhas—”

“Lies—*lies*, all of it!”

“That may well be; in fact, I pray it is so. All I’ve relayed is the news that trickled into Kanchi, upon which Thirukkoyilur Malayaman and Aditha Karikalar bid me leave for Eezham. My appointed task was to escort Arulmozhi Varmar home …”

Thus did Parthibendran retail all he knew, beginning from his journey to Ilankai and all that had transpired thence.

“Good God, Chozha Nadu is done for; catastrophe will strike any moment and it will all be at my hands—the hands of a sinner,” Pazhuvettarayar gave a deep, heartfelt groan. “Mine were the words inscribed on the royal warrant to imprison the prince—mine the deed that sent ships to bind Chozha Nadu’s pride and joy!”

“None of this is your fault, *Ayya*,” Nandhini soothed. “His highness would have boarded this man’s ship even had your orders not reached him, wouldn’t he? He was to have gone to Kanchi, after all. Calm yourself, *Nadha*; there’s such a thing as divine will, after all, that overrules our petty intentions. Besides …” She stopped speaking aloud at this point, turned, and whispered something into Pazhuvettarayar’s ears, which made the old war-dog’s face brighten at once.

“Why, yes, of course—now, why didn’t this occur to me?” He muttered. Then, he turned to glare at Parthibendran. “I shall investigate your ship in person, Pallava, and you will stay here until I return. Do not entertain the slightest intention of escape—for I shall instruct my warriors to spear you with their lances, should you place even a foot wrong. Careful, now—you do not wish for an ignominious death with a wound on your back, do you? Yours is a valourous clan; do not leave this world with the mark of a coward.”

“I thank you, *Ayya*, but I’ve no intention of making a run for it—not that your warriors could stop me if I did,” Parthibendran quipped. “Neither shall I sustain a wound in my back.”

“Never fear this man, my lord; I shall take care of all that needs to be done,” Nandhini promised, taking a step forward. “The slightest sign of escape and this shall plunge into his heart!” She pulled out a small dagger from her slender waist. “You’ve no need to be anxious; investigate his ship and interrogate his sailors as to the truth or otherwise of his statements.”

“Now, there really is no need for you to go to such trouble, my queen. Retire into your tent or if that will not suit, make your way to Thyaga Vidangar’s home. Our men may take care of this one or better yet, I shall take him with me—”

“I shall beg leave to excuse myself, *Ayya*; ugly suspicions might rear their heads if I accompany you. You might even entertain reservations about my men lying on my account. No, I shan’t move a step; you may search my ship and question my sailors as you please.”

“As for me, I shall stay in this very spot until you return, *Nadha*,” Nandhini promised in dulcet tones. “My eyes shall rest upon you and you alone …” She leant towards her husband and whispered in his ears. “I have my own qualms about this one; *he* might wish to investigate us, for his part. Besides, it’s in our best interests not to let news of the prince spread around the camp.”

Pazhuvettarayar had no choice, perforce, but to agree with this masterly strategy; he nodded and climbed into the boat, which soon began its journey towards the ship.

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Nandhini stayed upon the shore, watching the progress of the boat unblinkingly for a while. It did not take a moment for her to realize that Parthibendran was subjecting her face to the same treatment. She turned swiftly, fully expecting the man to lower his eyes, abashed … but could a bee, having tasted the exquisite sweetness of a blushing bloom’s nectar willingly relinquish its attentions? She slipped out her dagger again, fixing her large eyes upon him. “Careful, now,” she murmured. “Do not consider an escape …”

“Dare I even dream of such a dastardly act, *Devi*?” Parthibendran laughed gently. “Oh, put away that pretty little knife; there’s no point in scaring me with that toy. Run away? I? How could a fish ever hope to escape its net? It’s the same with me, snared in yours—”

“What’s this you say, *Ayya*?” She demanded. “A *valaignar* girl, am I? If these words ever fell upon the Pazhuvoor lord’s ears—”

“My mistake, *Devi*; not that I’d be afraid in the slightest of Pazhuvettarayar’s ire. No, allow me to correct my error: I wasn’t referring to humdrum fishing tools; rather, I wished to dwell upon the glorious nets of desire thrown out by your beautiful eyes—”

“*Chee*—how dare you? Far better to be called a petty *valaignar* girl casting nets for fish rather than a common *kanikai* throwing out lures for men … but here you are, insinuating—!”

“Forgive me, *Devi*—I have erred again, it seems. No, I certainly didn’t mean what you implied, for must you even lay snares? Does a spider weave its web for the fly’s edification? No, nothing of the sort; it does so for its own comfort—to build a home. But the simple fly flutters in by itself and is caught—”

“And now I’m a spider? I present such a horrifying appearance, I suppose.”

“Good God no, not at all. I ought to have likened you to a noble lamp. For what does it do but spread golden radiance around itself—yet idiotic *vittil* insects flutter and fly around it, mistaking its glow for a luscious fruit and burn …”

“A simple wind might snuff it—*gup*! And the glow ceases for evermore. Even a child could blow it out and that’s the end of a precious, noble lamp.”

“True as ever; that might indeed be a puny lamp’s fate but what of a luminous full moon? It rises in the sky not to entice Samudhra Rajan but in obedience to the undeniable laws of nature, bathing sky and earth in pearly beams for the enjoyment of all living creatures—but alas for the poor, disappointed ocean! Witness its choppy waves: why must it tumble

and churn at the very sight of the moon? Why must it yawn and fret for a glimpse of a luscious fruit always out of reach?"

"The tales I've heard about Pallava kings' wonderful creative powers and poetic capabilities are true, it would seem."

"All the epics and fantasies I've read—the *puraanams* and *kaaviyams*—made no impression on me until yesterday but now … *now* I believe in them."

"Of what do you speak?"

"I've heard tell of certain powerful beings wearing the form of mesmerizing women, able to bind sky and earth with their powers and capable of bringing both to their feet. Why, monstrous *asuras* fell for the charms of beauteous Mohini when, by rights, they ought to have been indulging in *amudham* borne of the milky seas; the massively strong Sundhoba Sundhas fought each other to the death for a woman; Sage Vishwamithra renounced his penance for the love of a celestial maiden; Kovalan lost his life and wife due to the bewitching charms of the courtesan Madhavi; King Dasarathar banished his beloved son Rama to the forest in obedience to his wife Kaikeyi's wishes; the magnificent Roman empire began to crumble, all for the sake of an Egyptian queen —"

"Stop—please! Good God, *Ayya*, why list these examples?"

"Don't you understand, *Devi*? All these tales—don't you truly see the parallel?"

"If they were meant to refer to me, then you couldn't have committed a greater mistake."

"Not at all, for your powers are no less than theirs."

"Your very words work against you."

"Do they, *Devi*?"

"I sent the Pazhuvoor lord to the ship on purpose, you see—I wished to ask you something."

“I perceived your desire in a flash, which is why I opted to stay rather than accompany him.”

“You mentioned a woman who tried to save Veera Pandiyan … and that Aditha Karikalar ignored her pleas to spare his life.”

“Indeed I did.”

“Are you aware of her identity?”

“The illustrious lady who lights the Pazhuvoor Palace these days with her luminous beauty; Ilaiya Rani Nandhini Devi, of course.”

“And if I did, indeed, possess those wondrous powers you described just now, shouldn’t I have been able to save the one I sought to protect? Why couldn’t I?”

“True enough that Aditha Karikalar’s bloodlust dashed down your entreaty—but only *I* know the terrible heartache eating him away for the past three years-and-a-half.”

“You do? How, *Ayya*? Did he mention it?”

“He’s been suffering the most dreadful torment in silence for years now. I suspected that some secret sorrow gnawed at him, but it wasn’t until ten days ago—the night before I set sail for Eezham, in fact—when he opened his heart to me and ever since …”

“Well? Ever since …?”

“I’ve been stricken with the intense desire to meet the Young Queen of Pazhuvoor.”

“Do you remember something you just said—that you’d have spared Veera Pandiyar’s life had you been in Aditha Karikalar’s place?”

“Certainly I do.”

“And … were you being honest?”

“*Sathyam*, *Devi*. I swear it. You may test me anyway you please.”

“A certain doubt has been causing me some anxiety. May I reveal it?”

“The most mundane words in your golden voice would gladden my ears; delight my heart.”

“You speak so to test me, I suspect. You mean to snare me by insinuating that I cast out nets of desire to men—you wish to trap me into revealing my heart.”

Parthibendran stared at her, startled. Her accusation had certainly had some foundation—when he had begun the conversation, at any rate. Suspicious about her true motivations and deeply contemptuous of her so-called beauty, he had indeed hoped to ensnare this vicious snake in a clever ambush … until he was overthrown by his own folly. Her ravishing loveliness had drowned him in a churning sea of desire—and his devious stratagems had been forgotten within moments. Such was his lust now, and so well was he mired in it that he was actually conscious of chagrin; how could he have ever designed a ruse to capture such a glorious creature? “If I were guilty of such a shameful hoax, *Devi*—if I were truly a spy—may lightning strike me where I stand!” He swore, scrambling to cover his embarrassment.

“*Ayyo*, don’t even hint such a thing,” Nandhini shrieked a little.

“Why, *Devi*? Mustn’t I?”

“The envoy from your prince—what was his name, now?”

“Vandhiyathevan?”

“Ah yes, that one. He tried to trick me—spied on me, in fact … and now, it would seem lightning truly did strike him!”

“Regretfully, no—only the ship he happened to be in! And so his peril ensnared the prince too!”

“Ah, the *poor* Pazhaiyarai princess! I declare, my heart is wrung with pity when I think of the cruel fate that has befallen her—losing the two men dearest to her in one fell swoop! What a pitiful, unfortunate creature, to be sure—”

“*Two* men, you say, *Devi*?”

“The couple you mentioned, of course. All the world knows Kundhavai’s much-vaunted affection for her beloved young brother, doesn’t it?”

“Well yes, of course—but what about the other man who—”

“The senior prince’s precious envoy, you know.”

“You can’t mean Vandhiyathevan.”

“Certainly I do.”

“*Chee*! To think of Pazhaiyarai Ilaiya Piratti, a woman capable of manipulating the whole of Chozha *samrajyam* as she pleased, setting her heart upon an arrogant, conceited nobody; that petty, insolent *boy*—”

“But yes; she did indeed. It was to save him from Pazhuvettarayar’s terrible retribution that she sent him to Ilankai with an *olai*, I tell you. Ah, wretched, shameless girl! Here’s my poor husband, lamenting that his was the hand that ruined the prince—but in truth, the blame for the *ilango*’s terrible fate rests solely upon his beloved sister’s devious machinations. If she hadn’t sent her precious message …”

“You are entirely correct; none of these tragedies might have occurred.”

“And should you be the one to apprise my husband of this truth when he returns to shore from the ship, my eternal gratitude shall be yours.”

“Is there no other way to make myself deserving of your thanks, *Devi*? May I not accomplish anything else in your blessed service—”

“There are a hundred ways to earn the gratitude of a simple, naïve woman, *Ayya*.”

“Pray, divulge one or two more, *Ammani*. Aditha Karikalar had one such golden opportunity handed on a platter but let it slip forever; now,

he torments himself day and night for what might have been. I, however, have no intention of following in his footsteps."

"Do you speak the truth, *Ayya*? Are you the kind of man who would devote himself heart and soul to fulfilling the wishes of a female?"

"That, *Devi*, would depend on the lady herself. Until yesterday, I would not have expended a moment in servitude to a female; I would have laughed in the face of anyone who dared suggest such an outrageous eventuality. Not today, though. Say the word—*say the word*, my lady and if I had an hundred souls, all shall be laid at your pretty feet; a thousand *samrajyams* would I sacrifice, *Devi*, in your glorious cause. Heart, body and soul, the prospect of this world and the next—all, *all* would be foresworn at a single glance from you; I shall forgive the most traitorous enemies at one word from you; chop the heads of my dearest friends should you so desire it—never, not for a moment shall I rest until I execute your heart's desire …"

Parthibendran's body trembled from head to foot as he blurted these words; he shook as though with the ague. His lips quivered, the very words running into each other in a garbled mess; his teeth ground audibly; skin prickled and hair stood on end; his breath blew hot and loud like the bellows of an ironsmith's forge.

This remarkable transformation might puzzle our esteemed readers. Why, it is doubtful if Parthibendran would have believed it, had someone informed him that such would be his temperament within the space of a day. There is no doubt that his changed behaviour would stun him in later days.

And yet—this has nothing to do with Parthibendran or his character in particular but rather, human nature in general.

Despite rigorous research and persistent studies, scientists have still not plumbed the depths of the secrets harboured by the human body; how, then, may one learn those of a human heart? Sinners, filthy with crime and misdeeds suddenly cast off their sordid past one day, emerging pure as though forged in fire; they sing and dance in praise of the divine; gain the immortal grace of God and elevate society by performing great deeds, setting examples to their peers.

In direct contrast are those who have led a blameless existence for years and in one moment lose their footing, often tumbling into the very abyss of immorality from which there is no reprieve.

Nandhini, who had been listening to Parthibendran's impassioned pleas with what patience she could muster, now clapped her hands over her ears. "Enough, *Ayya*, *enough*," she besought gracefully. "I have no terrible commission with which to challenge your courageous spirit; rather, I'd like to lay before you a proposition," she trained her eyes upon his face. "One that will be the source of great happiness to both of us."

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3

An Owl's Cry

Nandhini turned towards the ocean again, gauging Pazhuvettarayar's progress in a small boat towards the anchored ship. A deep sigh escaped her—a sigh which tossed and churned Parthibendran's stormy heart.

"What is it that you wish, *Devi*? Reveal your heart's desire and I shall fulfill it—for there can never be variance between your opinion and mine, now," he prattled. "I shall like what you like, and hate what you despise!"

Strange, unfamiliar thoughts flitted through his mind at that moment; this young woman, he was convinced, was a guileless, innocent parrot trapped in that old man's gilded cage. Surely he could secure release from the ties that bound her to that vicious jungle cat? If only—if only she whispered a word of her true sentiments! Parthibendran would issue a command to arrest her doddering husband on the very ship, and pack him off to some far-off, unknown land! *Chee*, wretched, lecherous idiot—to marry a maiden, a girl young enough to be his own daughter or even grand-daughter …

Nandhini's gaze, however, was still fixed firmly upon the craft and the ship, watching Pazhuvettarayar climb into the large vessel. "Thank God he's made it aboard," she murmured devoutly. "Warrior he may be, but the years have taken their toll haven't they? I was so worried that my lord and master might stumble upon the ladder," she confided.

The Pallava prince listened to this effusion with considerable disappointment. What did she care about that old man anyway? What did his precious safety matter? He could tumble into the sea and drown for all Parthibendran cared—ha, good riddance to the country and freedom for her! In any case, why must *she* fret over that doting fool?

"I never quite realized the depth of his devotion to the Chozhas until today," Nandhini began conversationally. "To see him lose his composure

at the very idea of danger threatening the prince! How overwhelmed—" She turned to him abruptly. "*Ayya*, the prince could've stumbled to safety, couldn't he? His death isn't an absolute certainty, is it?"

"Not at all—but I ought to warn you: the chances of anyone surviving such a terrible fall in the sea during a treacherous whirlwind are non-existent. What may one do to overturn the fates, after all?" Parthibendran sounded pious in the extreme.

"Oh, not the fates—blame that petty Pazhaiyarai witch and her ravenous greed, if blame you must. Are you aware of her predilection for astrology and palmistry, *Ayya*? She would pore over her beloved *thambi*'s horoscope and gaze at his palms for hours together, entertaining the wildest hopes of his ruling the three worlds as sole Chakravarthy! *Ayyo*, I can't bear to even think of her anguish at her precious brother's wretched fate! That poor, unfortunate thing—almost do I wish to be at her side during these very trying times, and offer solace …" Nandhini's voice rang with ill-concealed glee during this virtuous speech and Parthibendran blinked, lost in astonishment.

Then he shook his head. Clearly, his ears must have been at fault. "Offer solace—come, come, *Rani*, why must you? This disaster was clearly the result of her devious machinations; it is only right that she suffer the consequences of her own terrible actions—"

"Is that so, indeed? Ah, no—a thousand, ten thousand hearts in Chozha Nadu would suffer agonies at the sight of a single tear in those beautiful eyes, wouldn't they? She's the Chozha Emperor's illustrious daughter after all; the loveliest maiden, a beauty without equal in the three worlds—"

"So too did I think at one time, *Devi*—before I set eyes upon you, that is."

"And after …?"

"Realization hit me that all of Kundhavai's so-called beauty couldn't match even that of your little toe."

“So you say now—but set eyes on her tomorrow and you’d forget my very existence!”

“Never, *Devi*, *never*—didn’t I beg you to test me, just now? I did, didn’t I? Command me this very instant.”

“You ask me to exercise a right I do not possess; let me petition you, rather. *Ayya*, there are those who accuse me of devious plots; they insinuate that Chozha Nadu is splintering at the hands of Pazhuvettarayar’s new wife; that my marriage is the cause of chaos, confusion and this country’s present misfortunes. I wish to prove this a falsehood; it’s for this that I beg your assistance.”

Parthibendran was conscious of another pang of disappointment. He’d hoped to perform extraordinary deeds in her personal cause; he’d wished she’d ask him to accomplish the impossible for her own self. He would risk his body, life and soul in achieving her ambition; she would promptly be delighted at his indomitable spirit—and therein would lie his salvation. Instead here she was, prattling something of state affairs …

“Unburden yourself, my queen,” he assured her, anyway. “Tell me what it is that you wish.”

“*Ayya*, Chozha Nadu’s present distress is all due to the evil schemes of Ilaiya Piratti; her outrageous arrogance and hoydenish behaviour have driven all the lords of the realm and chieftains into fury. It had always been her dearest ambition to set her precious brother Arulmozhi Varman on the Chozha throne—which was why she destroyed all attempts at negotiation. But that hope has been dashed to pieces. Now—*now*, I do believe that there’s room for some sort of compromise. Hark, *Ayya*—it’s just as you said: ministers and *peruntharam* officers much prefer Madhuranthakar upon the throne after Sundara Chozhar. And, well—the Chakravarthy has consented to this arrangement.”

“Indeed, *Devi*?”

“*Ayya*, would he have authorized a command to imprison the prince, otherwise? Even so, I believe such a step to be imprudent; there’s still room for diplomacy and a mutually beneficial truce. Arrangements could be made, for example, to split the kingdom in two: the regions north of

River Vellaaru made over to Aditha Karikalar and the south, to Madhuranthakar. Didn't your noble ancestors, the glorious Pallava monarchs consider themselves satisfied with just Thondai Mandalam? Why, Chozha kings of yore were content in earlier times, with a small area between the two Vellaaru Rivers—"

"Why recite royal policy to me, *Devi*? What do I care about the fate of kingdoms—or who might rule them—"

"I believed you to be a loyal friend of Aditha Karikalar, *Ayya*—and devoted to his best interests."

"*Devi*, I've lost count of the days spent in the service of someone else; working myself to the bone to reap honours for someone else; putting myself in danger in the best interests of someone else. I should like to live a little for myself now. Do listen to this, *Devi*: I've wondered often about the purpose of my birth; why I've lived so long upon this world. My ancestors were illustrious emperors as you so rightly mentioned; they ruled vast lands and built fantastic worlds such as Maamallapuram that entranced visitors. I've wondered, sometimes, if my life's mission was to return Thondai Mandalam to its former glory; if I was meant to restore the ancient fame of the Pallava Empire. But I wasn't sure, for my mind refused to travel down this path; I could see no joy in building new cities or even entire empires. I contented myself with serving the Chozhas and earning honours in their service. I gloried in winning wars for them; I delighted in Aditha Karikalar's friendship and with these petty pleasures, I believed myself content. I consoled myself that such was my lot; there was nothing more to my life—until today, when my eyes finally opened to the truth; until this very moment, when I realized the purpose of my birth. Hark, *Devi*! Those waves battering the shore agree; *Yes! Yes!* they thunder in step with my heartbeat. The birds of these very forests echo my conscience: *True! True!* they warble with every word I speak. *Devi*, pray don't broach the subject of apportioning the Chozha kingdom—speak to me of something else! Command me to offer great handfuls of priceless, pretty corals from islands far off these coasts—order me to harvest sparkling strands of translucent pearls from the bottom of the oceans—drive me to the peaks of Meru in search of the priceless Sanjeevi herb—ask me to fly to the very heavens, and I shall snatch glittering stars by the handfuls, string them into a necklace and throw it around your neck— demand of me the moon, and I shall pluck it

from the very skies and hand the *poorna chandran* for your very own, golden mirror –”

“Good God, *Ayya*, enough—*enough*! The Pazhaiyarai princess has already labelled me a lunatic—pray don’t make me one with these speeches!” Nandhini implored.

Parthibendran subsided, abashed. “Indeed, *Devi*, it is I who seem to have lost my senses. My apologies,” he admitted, rather sheepishly. “Do reveal your heart’s desire.”

“There is only one, *Ayya*: I wish to cleanse the ill-repute that clings to my name in Chozha Nadu—in the whole of Tamilagam, in fact. It is for this that I wish your aid. Word has reached me that the good citizens of this country trace the ills besieging the Chozha clan to my marriage to this old man—that it is I who have turned Madhuranthakar’s mind from piety to princely desires; mine was the hand that pushed the lords of the land away from the Emperor … understand this, *Ayya*: I don’t wish to give up life with such blame attaching to my name—”

“Pray, why speak of death, *Devi*? Unless you wish to torment me—”

“Are you familiar with palmistry, my lord?” Nandhini changed tack without rhyme or reason. “Do you believe in such things?”

Far from vouchsafing a reply, Parthibendran changed tack himself. “Your palms—may I see them?”

She stretched out her right hand.

He scrutinized it keenly for a while. “Wonderful,” he murmured as if to himself. “Never have I seen such an astonishing *rekai* on any palm—may I see the other too?”

Nandhini obligingly stretched out her left hand and Parthibendran duly bent his powerful gaze upon her palm. “*Devi*,” he raised glowing eyes to hers finally. “Has anyone ever observed these extraordinary lines and given a reading?”

“Once. Pazhaiyarai’s Ilaiya Piratti took a look and mentioned certain things …”

“What was her verdict?”

“That I would die young.”

“Not bad,” Parthibendran commented. “She was right.”

“*Ayya*yo! Do *you* think so as well?”

“But clearly, she’s one of those half-baked idiots who do not acquire proficiency in any *saasthram*. One of these lines does indicate an early death, yes—but the other shows a clear sign that such a great disaster will be overcome, and a new life begun. And this rebirth, this *punarjenmam* shall usher in wondrous journeys overseas—a life filled with unimaginable happiness that even the king of kings may yearn for in vain. And all this, courtesy of an unlooked-for meeting with a charming young man on the seashore. His love for you is boundless and true; these *rekai* lines proclaim clearly that he shall give up his very life in the fulfillment of your slightest wish …”

And then, Parthibendran lost his head. Carried away by his pretty speech, he clutched Nandhini’s outstretched palms abruptly, and pressed them to his eyes.

She snatched back her hands in an instant and shook them as if to rid herself of dirt. “*Chee*! What sort of behaviour is this?”

“Forgive me; for a moment, I forgot that these were your hands—they seemed to me like two delicate red lotuses.”

“Had Pazhuvettarayar witnessed this sight, he’d have impaled you atop a *kazhumaram* in an instant!”

“My only regret, *Devi*, is that I have but one life to sacrifice in your cause –”

“And must it be in such a fashion? Pray guard it, that your life may be of some assistance to this poor orphan.”

“What is it that you wish of me?”

“Chozha *samrajyam* must be saved from annihilation through internecine warfare—which is where your aid is required.”

“How?”

“Find a way to bring your friend Karikalar to Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar’s palace. That old chieftain has a daughter—a daughter who can be married to him. And then… my dearest desire would’ve been achieved.”

“Really, *Devi*; such an elaborate prelude for the simplest of ambitions— well, I shall do as you please. And then…?”

“Half the rebellion would be quelled with this marriage; apportioning the northern half of the kingdom to Karikalar and the southern to Madhuranthakar would stifle it once and for all—”

“What then?”

“My reputation would have been cleansed of all taint; I shall fulfill my destiny by entering the sea and renouncing my life—”

“And I shall arrive, to save you. Our *punarjenmam*, our rebirth will begin in unison; together we shall sail to lands far, far away—and there will I establish a glorious empire for your sake.”

“Pray don’t speak in this abandoned fashion, *Ayya*; I am descended, after all, from a long line of traditional southern Tamil women devoted to their husbands; I am Pazhuvettarayar’s *dharma pathini* …”

“The truth, now, *Devi*,” Parthibendran fixed his burning eyes upon her ravishing form. “Why marry this doddering old man? Was it really for love—or did he force you into it?”

Nandhini heaved a shuddering sigh. Her eyes travelled upwards and for a few moments, she seemed lost in old, sorrowful memories. “It wouldn’t be just to blame the *kizhavar*,” she murmured, finally. “I married him willingly, with all my heart.”

“Why? Whatever for? What did you see in him that drove you into his arms?”

“Nothing at all, if you must know. Just a boundless desire for a life of luxury and authority, surrounded by wealth and servants in a royal palace —”

“Unbelievable.”

“Perhaps—but it’s the truth. A certain woman taunted me in my childhood: she lost no opportunity to put me down because I was poor and an orphan; she declared that I had no right to even play with the royal children. And, well—I couldn’t bear the hurt and frustration. In the end, those cruel jeers goaded me into this rash decision.”

“Who was she—the one who subjected you to this treatment?”

“Don’t you know? Couldn’t you guess?”

“Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“I swear—one day, I shall teach her a lesson.”

“God has accomplished that today: she’s been well-schooled by divine will. Her precious young brother and beloved lover were vanquished in one fell stroke. I feel rather sorry for her now.”

“Arrogance such as hers deserves a far harsher punishment.”

“Her punishment, as you so rightly put it, would be complete if, with your assistance, the task we spoke of is accomplished. Her unjustified desire to rule over this entire *samrajyam* as a queen unopposed would be razed to the ground.”

“I shall carry out your commands to the letter—but what of my reward?”

“Anything you please—as long as it doesn’t contravene the laws or traditions governing sacred Tamil womanhood.”

“I’ve heard tell of a new religion spreading like wildfire in the western countries, *Rani*: in the Arabian kingdoms, Baghdad, Persia and other

such far-flung empires—and one of its tenets permit married couples to divorce if they so wish. There are specific rituals to be performed which allow separation and even women may re-marry with everyone's blessing."

"Indeed; I've heard of such things too."

"We shall journey to those countries and convert to their religion—"

"Many are the hours I've spent in such marvellous daydreams, but as to them coming true—"

"Why not, *Devi*? Of course they will—if you so wish. Say the word, and I shall board my ship with you. We shall sail upon the vast seas and disembark in foreign lands. By the strength of this very broadsword will I establish a potent, massive empire just for your sake; with these very hands shall I place you upon a splendid throne studded with the nine precious gems. The brilliant crown upon your head shall dazzle those who dare set eyes on it. This, *Devi*, is the purpose of my existence; I realize that I've escaped countless battlefields thus far just to achieve this ambition—"

"My husband returns as we speak, *Ayya*; the boat has almost reached shore. Calm down, now—we may speak of our mission later …"

"Later—when, *Devi*?"

"Accompany us to Thanjavur. If you cannot, as an honoured guest—then a dishonoured, imprisoned one!"

"*Your* invitation is more than sufficient," Parthibendran finished with a flourish.

Pazhuvettarayar's boat beached the sands; the old man stomped up the sandy shore, fairly bristling with wrath.

Nandhini and Parthibendran rose at once, but this sign of deference did nothing to assuage the Pazhuvoor lord's temper, whose eyes spat sparks of fury as they settled on them. Just the thought of their heads close together in conversation was enough to thrust the poor man into

burning agony, but there was no outlet for the anger that bubbled up within—and this, naturally, made the situation worse.

“Did you search the ship thoroughly, *Nadha*?” Nandhini’s lilting voice with something of the beguiling lisp of a child, wafted towards him. “What about the sailors? Was everything as this man said? Was he speaking the truth?”

Her adroit approach and solicitous words soothed the advancing Pazhuvoor lord a little.

“Indeed, yes, *Rani*,” he heaved a deep sigh. “He seems to have laid out the facts as they were: Chozha Nadu’s beloved son—this *samrajyam*’s golden prince, the apple of our eyes, that precious boy—is gone,” He growled, and turned bloodshot eyes towards the Parthibendran. “And this murderous rogue right here is the reason!”

“Pray don’t set the blame for this catastrophe upon me, *Ayya*!” Parthibendran replied in clipped tones. “There can only be one reason for the prince’s demise upon the high seas—the evil plots and machinations of the she-devil who manipulates the whole of Chozha Nadu; a *mohini pisaasu* posing as a maiden!”

This, Pazhuvettarayar jumped to the conclusion, could refer to none other than Nandhini herself; his fury, kept on a tight leash for the sake of appearances, burst into a raging, roaring inferno.

“You—you scoundrel!” He barked, bending swiftly and snatching up a spear on the ground. “*What did you say?*” And he aimed the weapon at Parthibendran.

Quick as a flash, Nandhini caught at his hands. “How could you, Husband?” She demanded. “Your glorious spear, stained with the blood of foes cannot be tainted with that of our guest—”

“*Rani*, how could *you*?” The old man’s voice grew hoarse; his words stuttered with the force of his anger. “A guest indeed! Did you not hear what he said—the words he used to describe you?”

“Describe me indeed,” Nandhini replied with spirit. “You’d do well to confirm the truth of that, my lord. If this man had indeed meant me, I wouldn’t have given you the trouble of avenging me—my own dagger would have been put to excellent use!”

“I’m no fool, *Ayya*, to refer to the illustrious queen of Pazhuvoor thus; rather, I meant the ghoul that resides in Pazhaiyarai—the witch, Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi, who charged Vandhiyathevan with a secret *olai* to Ilankai—and wasn’t it in the process of trying to save that ruffian, despite all my appeals, that our dear prince met an untimely end? Doesn’t that make his precious sister the author of all these evils?”

This served to calm Pazhuvettarayar’s seething mind somewhat; the old man even felt a little abashed at his hasty, unseemly assumption—but naturally, he did have his dignity to preserve. “Cease these pretty speeches; you were as responsible as that woman for the prince’s death! Why did you not stop his idiotic attempts to stage a stupid rescue? Out of my sight!” He fairly spat. “Do not ever set foot in my presence again!”

“But it would be best if he came with us, wouldn’t it, *Nadha*?” Nandhini put forward her suggestion. “It would be in our interests if he described in person the events as they happened, to the Chakravarthy—or our detractors would seize this opportunity to pin this calamity too, upon us. They’d accuse us of having plotted to drown the prince, wouldn’t they?”

“Accusations! I care a jot for those—and if anyone dares open his mouth to speak such falsehoods, I shall cut his tongue out myself! But stay … I suppose his presence would serve one purpose at least—why do you stare around so, Parthibendra? Seeking an escape route, are you?” And Pazhuvettarayar signed towards the sentries who stood at a distance, upon which four came running. “Tie him up,” commanded the old man.

The guards approached the younger man; Parthibendran moved not a muscle until they were almost upon him—and then showed his mettle. Pazhuvettarayar’s men flew in four directions.

“Never let it be said that I allowed myself to be worsted by mere guards,” Parthibendran announced with aplomb. “If imprisoned I must be,

I'd rather submit to a warrior among warriors, the man who bears sixty-four scars from thirty-six battlefields, the valiant Periya Pazhuvettarayar himself—not simpletons!"

Despite himself, the Pazhuvoor lord brightened a little. "There is no doubt about your pedigree; you are a worthy scion of the valorous Pallava clan," he admitted. "Accept our stipulation to come to Thanjavur, and there shall be no need to bind you."

"Your command coincides with my desire," announced Parthibendran. "After all, I've no wish to be named conspirator to the prince's fate—I should like to tell my side of the story to the Chakravarthy."

"In that case, we shall leave at once," assented Pazhuvettarayar.

An owl's hoot floated over from the forest at a little distance.

Nandhini turned in the direction of the low cry—and so, the change in her expression escaped the attention of both men.

"Outlandish, these Kodikkarai forests," Parthibendran commented. "Night birds screech in broad daylight!"

Twice more was the owl's shrill cry heard.

"Must we leave right away?" Nandhini turned to her husband. "Couldn't we possibly wait another day? The prince might reach shore holding on to some plank or the other, mightn't he?"

"Ah, witness the Ilaiya Rani's wisdom, Parthibendra! Not even we considered such an eventuality, did we?" exulted Pazhuvettarayar. "Indeed, we would do well not just to tarry awhile but stand men all along the seashore; they ought to search the beaches as far as they can."

"I've no objection, *Ayya*, but frankly, I've no hope of his retrieval," shrugged Parthibendran. "Had you seen the seas heaving and tossing during that terrible whirlwind, you'd feel as discouraged."

The battle-hardened old man paid no heed to this sage counsel, but set his men to sentry duty all along the shore for a *kaadham*. Not content

with these arrangements, he himself prowled the area restlessly, hoping for some kind of absolution.

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4

The Thaazhai Hedge

Gentle as a cradle bobbed the boat, rocking with lazy delight in a sea so tranquil that it was hard to believe that huge, seething waves the height of coconut trees had risen and fallen a bare two days ago.

The little craft now carried Prince Ponniyin Selvar, Vandhiyathevan and Poonguzhali. The young maiden held oars it was true, but her hands no longer plied them; all her attention was focused on the other occupants, ears straining not to miss a single word of their conversation. They, for their part, were intent on argument, not seeming to care that the boat barely made any progress.

The subject of their vocal wrangle was uncomplicated enough: their eventual destination upon arrival at Kodikkarai. Vandhiyathevan's contention was that the prince ought not to set foot in Thanjavur but travel straight to Pazhaiyarai, and many were the reasons he put forth to bolster his choice. "Your sister wishes to consult you upon a most important matter," he pleaded. "I've sworn to deliver you into her hands, too; you know I ought to honour my pledge—"

"—and you expect to fulfill your precious mission by forcing me to contravene my father's direct command, do you?" demanded the prince in some anger.

"Except that it isn't his but the Pazhuvettarayars'," Vandhiyathevan argued. "Besides, should you seek an audience with the Emperor, wouldn't it be better to do so as a free man rather than as a prisoner?" He saw the arrested expression in the prince's eyes, and pressed his advantage. "Now, just listen a moment: should news of your imprisonment spread, the entire Chozha population would rise up in arms. Your beloved motherland would turn into a bloody, war-torn field of massacre. Think, Sire—would you wish that to happen?" He drove home

his point. “The great God Himself must have sent down this whirlwind to prevent Chozha Nadu being marred by bloodshed; are you about to overturn divine will, set foot in your country and start a gory riot?”

Of all the Vaanar warrior’s arguments, this last served to influence the prince a good deal. Well aware of his considerable popularity, instinct warned him that arrest at the Pazhuvettarayars’ hands might well lead to a public uprising. He sank into thought, considering his options. “Assuming I decide upon your alternative, how can it be accomplished?” He asked, finally. “Won’t Pazhuvoor men lie in wait for me?”

“That’s where we’re in luck; we’ve an excellent aide in this boat-girl. Such is her familiarity with these parts that she can lead us into the forest without a single soul on the shore being wiser. Can’t you, Poonguzhali? It *is* possible, isn’t it?” Vandhiyathevan raised his voice. “Did you listen to a word I said?”

For, that young woman was floating somewhere in the seventh heaven of delight. Her heart leapt with joy at having been the means of saving the prince from a watery grave by taking him into her petty boat. The thought that she would have to part from him once they reached Kodikkarai could not but pierce her heart, like a painful thorn—but now, it looked like her services would be required further; what blessed fortune was hers! Dare she ask for more?

“I could steer this boat into a canal hedged in by the forest, a little to the west of Kodikkarai,” Poonguzhali volunteered. “It’s swampy beyond the banks; very few people can break through.”

“You could leave us there and go into the village, couldn’t you?” Vandhiyathevan hazarded. “And find what news you can?”

“By all means. There are many densely wooded spots I can moor this boat so it’s practically invisible.”

“Hear that, Highness?”

“Certainly, my man. You’re asking me to sneak into my own land like a thief, and cower in hiding like a hardened criminal.”

Silence reigned, for a space. Then, the prince seemed to rouse himself. “Why has the boat come to a standstill, Samudhra Kumari?”

Poonguzhali darted a glance at Vandhiyathevan, and began to ply her oars.

“The poor girl can’t row for hours all by herself,” Vallavarayan commented. “I may as well make myself useful. Do give me those oars, Amma; I shall take over for a space—” And he rose.

The prince, divining his intentions to a nicety, chuckled a little. “Your wonderful ruses are all in vain, my friend,” he said, slowly. “I’m neither going to make it to Pazhaiyarai, nor see Thanjavur in this lifetime—no, I believe God wishes to transport me straight to His heavenly abode; Kailaayam itself!”

Vandhiyathevan and Poonguzhali stopped short and stared at him, alarmed. It didn’t take them more than a few moments to realize that he was shivering. The Vaanar warrior stooped over him, eyes wide. “*Ayya*, why does your body tremble so?” he asked. “What *is* it?”

“The infamous ague that haunts large parts of Ilankai, *Appane*,” the prince divulged with a sad smile. “I’ve mentioned its onslaught before—don’t you remember? Those who’ve caught it seldom survive, you know.”

Vandhiyathevan, who hadn’t lost his wits even during the brutal lightning strike atop the mast that led to the ship’s subsequent destruction mid-sea, stood completely petrified at the prince’s pronouncement. As for Poonguzhali, the oars had long slipped her stiff, frozen fingers; life itself had drained from her body, it seemed. Only her eyes still retained a spark of spirit and through these, mere shadows of her former, vibrant self, she stared at the prince, paralyzed.

The shivering increased rapidly; soon, he was trembling so much that his body began to leap up from his seat.

“Good God—! *Ayya*, what do I do? Where do I steer this boat?” Vandhiyathevan’s words tumbled over each other in blind panic. “Poonguzhali, could we find a competent physician in Kodikkarai?”

She, for her part, was speechless; a maiden turned to stone.

Abruptly, the prince jumped up. His weakened body, already shivering with the ague, now swayed and staggered, unable to stand steady. “Take me to my sister!” He slurred. “Take me to Ilaiya Piratti at once!” Garbled and fever-soaked the words might be, but they were not wholly devoid of sense.

Vandhiyathevan stared at him, jubilant. In fact, such was his relief that he stood still, unable to decide his next course of action.

The prince, it seemed, chose to make it for him. “*Akka*, I’m coming,” he mumbled, awareness deserting him. “I’m coming now—no one shall stop me!”Already shaking with weakness, he stumbled to the edge of the boat, ready to leap into the sea.

Thankfully, Vandhiyathevan, who had realized by this time that the prince was no longer in full possession of his faculties, sprang forward and clutched him. Arulmozhi Varmar, already possessed of great strength, now seemed to have assumed superhuman might; it was all Vandhiyathevan could do to hold him down, unmanageable in the grip of a terrible fever. “Poonguzhali,” he called out, realizing that the task was beyond him. “Come here—*quick*!”

Paralyzed Poonguzhali came to life at that moment. She bounded forward, grasping the prince to stop him tumbling headfirst into the sea.

Abruptly, the prince’s demon strength, akin to that of a mad elephant, deserted him; he transformed into a frail, fretful child in an instant. “I shall lie down, *Akka*,” he murmured. “You won’t be upset with me, will you? I shall do whatever you say—*Akka*, what would I become without you?” And he sobbed weakly.

Vandhiyathevan and Poonguzhali lay him gently, inside the boat.

There wasn’t much activity from Ponniyin Selvar after that. He lay crumpled in his seat, listless and confused. His large eyes stared somewhere beyond the horizon while his lips uttered jumbled words from time to time. Some made sense but most were random, incoherent utterances, devoid of meaning.

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There was no point, Vandhiyathevan understood, in depending upon the prince's counsel. Realization hit him suddenly that he was now solely responsible for Ponniyin Selvar's well-being; the charge of staging his rescue from this perilous situation had now devolved upon him and him alone. But stay—all was not lost, yet. There was this girl to help him, and fortunately, she cared as much about the prince as he did. Not to mention God's grace that had miraculously bailed him out of many such dangers.

"The boat can go faster now, couldn't it, Poonguzhali?" Vandhiyathevan prodded, and she gathered the shreds of her tattered composure. Her strong hands regained their old strength; the oars were plied surely and steadily, the craft leapt forward, cutting through the waters.

For his part, Vallavarayan seated himself carefully by the prince's side. What if he should leap up and try to dive into the sea once more? The very thought made him grow cold and so, even as his mind pored furiously over his next course of action, considering and discarding various schemes, Vandhiyathevan kept a careful watch on his royal charge. After a while, he raised his head and gazed at Poonguzhali, still rowing hard. "What's your opinion, my girl?" He asked, suddenly. "Do you think it wise to risk it to Kodikkarai? Your family will help safeguard the prince, wouldn't it?"

"There's no saying who may be trusted during these times, *Ayya*," Poonguzhali replied cautiously. "My elder brother's wife, now—she's money-mad if ever there was one. As for my father, his income depends upon the Pazhuvettarayars." She paused. "Besides, the men who pursued you may be there still. Fresh reinforcements might have arrived in the hopes of finding the prince."

Vandhiyathevan marvelled at her forethought. Not for the first time, it occurred to him that her assistance in this trying time was his good fortune indeed. A miniscule source of relief and happiness, this. "You too believe it dangerous to land directly in Kodikkarai, then?" He ventured.

"Look over there!" She pointed.

A ship lay anchored in the direction of her finger and beyond could be glimpsed the top of Kodikkarai's renowned lighthouse.

"Ah, a huge vessel indeed—I wonder whose, though," Vandhiyathevan muttered. "Parthibendran's perhaps? If that's the case, wouldn't it be best to escort the prince to Kanchi?"

"The ship could be Pazhuvettarayar's too—do you see anything behind it?"

"The top of the Kodikkarai lighthouse."

"Anything peculiar there?"

"Not that I can see."

"*I* can, though—it seems to me that there are a group of people, staring hard at the sea."

"Would they be able to see this boat from that distance?"

"Not now—but if we approached the shore, yes."

"Discretion is the better part of valour, I think. We'd better steer the boat into that canal you mentioned, west of Kodikkarai. That can be done, can't it?"

"There's no other choice; we should be there by nightfall. Do you remember the *mandapam* you lay in, last time, *Ayya*? This canal winds very near it; if you concealed yourself there with the prince, I could get to Kodikkarai, learn what I can and return with all speed."

"Does the canal stop there, Poonguzhali? Or go further?"

"Right up to Nagapattinam," was her answer.

An interruption occurred just then—for Ponniyin Selvar's disjointed mumblings, low and unintelligible until now, suddenly grew loud. "Indeed, yes, *Akka*—you passed on the Nagapattinam *bikshus*' message, didn't you? And it all happened exactly as they'd said; Anuradhapuram's Buddhist faction offered me their throne and crown—but I refused. I

didn't want it because I loathe ruling, *Akka*. I shall do anything you wish but spare me the trials of kingship—I'd be happiest paddling a small boat in the high seas—*Akka*, do listen: there's a boat-girl in Kodikkarai …"

Poonguzhali's body quivered in exhilaration; Vandhiyathevan, on the other hand, was seized by an anxiety that threatened to devolve into panic. Both straightened with intense anticipation, ears sharpened to gather the next words he might let fall. The prince disappointed them—for he seemed to regain his senses a little and stared around, large eyes blinking dazedly. "Haven't we reached Kodikkarai yet?" His voice was feeble.

"There's the shore," Vandhiyathevan offered, but even as he wondered if the prince was good for an idea or two, his royal highness had slipped away from the real world and into his own of fever-nonsense.

***

The prince's final words about a boat-girl had tossed up waves of heaving, churning thoughts in the sea of Poonguzhali's heart; she found it embarrassing to even look at Ponniyin Selvar or Vandhiyathevan and directed her eyes instead to the boat's path, cleaved by her able hands. The little craft, hitherto moving steadily towards the ship, now turned and marked its way south-west. By the time night stretched inky fingers towards the earth, it had entered a narrow canal that snaked inland, its banks indeed high, trees clustering thickly atop the dirt-hardened surface, just as Poonguzhali had described.

She steered the boat to a stop by the shore, and stepped on land. "Take care, *Ayya*," she whispered to Vandhiyathevan and quickly shinned up a tall tree, gauging her surroundings. Moments later, she scrambled down. "A good thing we came here," she approached the boat. "Men have been stationed for at least a *kaadham* along the shore; there's a good deal of crowd and commotion by the lighthouse."

"Any idea about their identity?" Vandhiyathevan demanded eagerly.

"I'm not sure—still, who but Pazhuvettarayar's men? Whoever they are, we'd better get to the place I mentioned. I shall reach home before

the second *jaamam*, learn everything for certain and return," Poonguzhali answered.

"What if someone sees you, my girl?" Vandhiyathevan hissed. "Our fates are sealed if anything should befall you—"

"I cared nothing for my life before, *Ayya*—but I do, now. I'm confident that nothing shall happen to me until the prince is safe and sound," Poonguzhali assured him as she took up her oars again, plying them so softly that not a sound arose.

Slowly, slowly, the boat slunk along the stream; the shadows of large trees lining the banks fell upon the water in dark masses that deepened the gloom and made the surface murkier than ever. Stars winked in the velvety black sky, seeming to mark the progress of the little boat with as much anxiety as Vandhiyathevan himself. Careless winds shook tree-branches; their shadows shifted and wavered upon the canal's surface, blotting out the reflection of the stars. To Vallavarayan, peering over the edge, the water's restlessness seemed an accurate reflection of his heart's agitation.

After a *naazhigai* that seemed like an endless aeon, Poonguzhali finally drew the boat to shore.

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She crept up the banks and plunged into the forest—that is, her body did. Her soul, however, was still hovering over the little craft tied by the canal.

The night was young; Poonguzhali ignored thorns, rises, pot-holes, wild animals, poisonous reptiles, and hurried grimly along the jungle path. Where the way lay clear, she stepped up her pace and even ran, aiming straight for the Kodikkarai Kuzhagar temple. Her estimate and speed proved to be in her favour, for she reached the shrine just as the priest was locking the doors.

Poonguzhali paused, stared about to ascertain that they were alone and abruptly presented herself in front of the *Gurukkal*, who turned just that moment, having finally secured the entrance.

The old man jumped. Aware as he was of her vagaries and singular temperament, her sudden appearance out of nowhere did startle him and he peered at her, astonished. “Good God, is it you indeed, my girl? I did wonder who it might be, for Kodikkarai is in uproar now, you know. Where were you all these days? Even amidst all this upheaval, I did wonder—and this very evening too—that there was no news of you …”

“I’d gone out of town, *Swami*. I returned to find scores of men littering these parts and came here to enquire,” Poonguzhali answered airily. “Who *are* they?”

“Do you know nothing, then? Have you not been home?”

“I have—but the place was teeming with people and I left,” she shrugged. “You know my dislike of newcomers, *Swami*. And so … who are they all?”

“Periya Pazhuvettarayar has arrived and so has his Ilaiya Rani, along with both their entire entourages. And there is another from Kanchipuram—someone called Parthibendra Pallavan, I believe. He isn’t here for his pleasure either for he brought terrible tidings … do you not know of even this, Poonguzhali?”

“No, I tell you. What on earth’s this disastrous news?”

“Ponniyin Selvar was aboard his ship, and there was a terrible whirlwind and the prince jumped into the sea to save someone and was never found! Pazhuvettarayar’s men are scouring the entire shore—so does the Pazhuvoor lord himself—in the vain hope that he might be washed ashore along these parts. Why, his young queen wanders about, too—in fact, she was here, in this temple, some time ago. Rumours run wild about her but I tell you, Poonguzhali—they could not be further from the truth! Ah, her anguish at our prince’s disappearance; her immense anxiety over his fate …!”

“Indeed, *Swami*? My heart rejoices at your excellent opinion of the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani—but why would she come here?”

“To pay obeisance to Kuzhagar of course, and beg for the prince’s safe deliverance. Not everyone could be as hard-hearted as you, my girl;

not the slightest sign of sorrow have you shown at this appalling news—”

“Becoming prostrate with grief would serve no purpose, *Swami*; haven’t you mentioned time and again that fate dictates our petty lives? Be that as it may—I’ve no wish to go home when it’s overflowing with such illustrious visitors. Do please, as a favour, hand over the *prasadham*; it will do very well for a meal and I shall stay the night in this temple.”

“You are the strangest girl I have ever known, Poonguzhali. Ordinary mortals usually seize the chance to meet lords and further their acquaintance at the slightest opportunity, but you hate the sight of newcomers—and freeze in terror if they happen to be members of the nobility. Would they gobble you up in a single mouthful, Girl? Why banish yourself to the depressing forest thus?”

“You needn’t give me your precious *prasadham* if you’d rather not—but kindly stop abusing me, *Swami*.”

“Siva-Siva! Why would I subject you to such treatment, my child? All I’m worried about is that these offerings might not satisfy your hunger—you may have them by all means.” And he handed over a small cloth bundle.

Poonguzhali undid the knot and peered inside. “You’re right; this certainly isn’t much. How unfair to offer such meager fare to a deity so great, *Swami*. By the way, what’s in that *gendi*? Drinking water?”

“Milk from the Lord’s *abishekam*, my dear. I’d hoped to save it for my child.”

“Permit me to be your child just this once, and leave that with me as well. The virtuous results of a thousand good deeds shall be yours.”

“What a girl you are! Well, well, keep the *gendi* safe, at least.” The *Gurukkal* duly handed over his belongings.

A shrill hoot sounded from somewhere in the distance.

Poonguzhali raised her head, startled. “What was that, *Ayya*?”

“You ought to know the cry, my dear. Kodikkarai’s forests certainly have no dearth of owls,” sighed the priest.

The call echoed across the jungle once more.

“Certainly seems like it,” Poonguzhali commented.

“No screeching bird can mar your rest, my dear,” remarked the priest as he began his solitary trek home. “Bolt the *prahaaram* gates and stay secure, *Amma*.”

Poonguzhali waited only until his form receded into the distance before bundling the food at her waist, picking up the *gendi*, and hurrying on her way back. She aimed for the direction of the owl’s hoot and plunged into the forest again, eventually happening upon a tiny waterway, both banks overflowing with unruly Thaazhai shrubs. Their thick, thorny fronds pricked her; she pushed on, unconcerned. Their blossoms fairly exploded with a sweet, cloying scent usually sending humans into ecstasy; Poonguzhali crept along the banks, unaware of the heady fragrance. Her sturdy feet made no noise; her ears, trained to the jungle, scarcely took note of the myriad sounds that usually erupt in the forest at night—rather, she seemed to be in expectation of one in particular … what, though?

Ah, there it was! Low voices. One male; the other, female.

Poonguzhali secreted herself more securely within the foliage, and sharpened her ears to the gentle hum of conversation.

“Like you, everyone believes that the prince has drowned at sea, *Mandhiravadhi*. Pazhuvettarayar is at the end of his tether, raving and mourning his fate,” murmured the feminine voice. “But I’m not convinced.”

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

During the perilous boat ride towards Kodikkarai, Poonguzhali mentions that her family cannot really be trusted to keep the prince’s presence a secret, for her father’s income depends

on the Pazhuvettarayars—but the exact phrase Kalki uses is "*padi alappavar"*—literally, one who offers rice or grain in a measure called *"padi."* In a time when remuneration was determined in kind rather than cash, Thyaga Vidangar would have likely been paid in measures of rice or grain by his overlord; even had he been paid in coins (for Chozha currency was in vogue), the phrase would have persisted, and would mean payment.

5

Raakkammal

Her beloved husband might have strolled along the beach in the company of Parthibendran but Nandhini lingered alone yet, lost in thought as her beautiful eyes settled vaguely upon the crashing waves.

"*Rani Amma*?"

She turned at the sound of the voice—and found lighthouse-keeper Thyaga Vidangar's daughter-in-law, standing very near. "Who are *you*?" Nandhini demanded.

"I am named Raakkammal."

"And your business here?"

Raakkammal vouchsafed no answer but peered intently at the Ilaiya Rani, instead.

"Well? What're you staring at, woman? What's so fascinating about my face?"

"Forgive me, *Amma*," Raakkammal shrank back, abashed. "You do remind me of someone… but it couldn't be, of course—"

"What on earth are you blathering about? *What* couldn't be?"

"There can't be any connection between you and that mute lunatic."

"Mute, is she?"

"There's one in Eezham; the daughter of my father-in-law's *periyappan*. She wanders hereabouts, sometimes …"

"What about her and me?"

“I did say, didn’t I, that there couldn’t possibly be a connection?”

“Why be reminded of her when you’re looking at me, then?”

“My eyes must be at fault, I suppose. Your face—”

“Resembles hers, does it?”

“It seemed so, at first.”

“Is that mute woman here now, Raakkamma?”

“No; she comes but rarely.”

“Will you bring her to me when she does?”

“But why, *Rani Amma*?”

“I’d like to see the one with a face like my own.”

“I did tell you that it was likely a trick played by my eyes.”

“So sure, are you?”

“Am I right in assuming that you’re from Pandiya Nadu, *Rani*?”

“Indeed. And you?”

“The same. But the mute I mentioned just now claims loyalty to Chozha Nadu. So …”

“It matters not. Others before you have mentioned this female—will you bring her to me? Be sure that I shall compensate you well.”

“One might as well try to stuff a whirlwind into a pot for she won’t stay a moment anywhere, and will listen to no one. I did mention that she’s a lunatic.”

“Be that as it may—at least tell me why you’re here now.”

“Two men came here a few days ago, *Rani*, in your name—”

“Did they? Why?”

“They were on an urgent mission to Ilankai at your behest, they informed us; I badgered my husband into ferrying them to the island.”

“Is he back?”

“No, and that worries me. If he’s in danger—”

“Unlikely. And even if something untoward should have happened to him, don’t worry; you are under my protection now. What of the men he ferried—do you know their fate?”

“They’ve returned, of course. Didn’t you hear the owl’s hoot a while ago, *Amma*?”

“I did—but what of it?”

“I would’ve thought you’d recognize the *mandhiravadhi*’s voice.”

“How did *you*—wait, are you one of his?”

“Indeed, *Rani*.” And Raakkammal made a sort of sign with her fingers.

Nandhini subjected her to an astonished stare for a few moments. “And … do you know where they are now?” she asked finally.

“The *mandhiravadhi* awaits you.”

“Unnecessary. Surely he can meet me here?”

“Not if there’s a chance of running into the Pallavan who was dawdling hereabouts, he says, for he spotted him in Ilankai, apparently. Neither does he wish to bump into your husband.”

“And did *you* meet the *mandhiravadhi*?”

“I heard the owl’s cry some time ago and stumbled upon him when I went to investigate. He wished me to bring you to where he’s hidden, on the banks of a stream near the Kuzhagar temple. Will you come, *Rani*?”

“But how can I?”

“Dutiful worship at the lord’s feet would provide an excellent excuse, don’t you think?”

“A good ruse, but what about an escort?”

“There’s no need for one—but we could take Sendhan Amudhan if you insist.”

“And who might that be?”

“Son to the Thanjavur *oomai*!”

“Siva-Siva—too many mutes!”

“This family is cursed. Some are born mute; others play dumb. My husband is one such; he speaks but rarely. I’ve decided on the same course of action.”

“Does the Ilankai *oomai* boast any offspring? Do you know?”

“Once she bore twins, it’s said, but their fate is unknown. I’ve tried for days to find out what became of them but so far, I’ve had no luck.”

“Why is the Thanjavur native here?”

“In search of his cousin Poonguzhali but she’s nowhere to be found, so he’s waiting.”

“And where’s she disappeared?”

“I was about to tell you that as well: two more men appeared, a day after my husband ferried the *mandhiravadhi*. Pazhuvoor men came in pursuit of these newcomers; my *naathi* Poonguzhali ferried one of them to Ilankai that very night.”

“Your sister-in-law knows her way around boats, then?”

“What she doesn’t know about them isn’t worth knowing; she spends almost all her time in the sea. Every moment she’s not on her craft is

spent in these forests—and what she doesn't know about Kodikkarai's every nook and cranny isn't worth knowing either."

"And she hasn't returned," Nandhini mused. "What do you gather from that?"

"Only that all this uproar about a certain someone being lost at sea —means nothing. I say that the truth or otherwise of that news will be known only upon Poonguzhali's appearance."

"Unless she's drowned too."

"Not she; the sea is her very cradle. Besides …"

"Yes?"

"I was atop the lighthouse some time ago, and it seemed to me that a small boat approached, from very far away—"

"And then?"

"It never came ashore."

"What could've happened?"

"The swarming crowds on land might have been observed; the boat might have been directed into a canal that cuts across swampy marsh."

"Is that even possible?"

"Nothing is impossible for Poonguzhali, I tell you. The *Thanjavurkkaaran* was with me atop the lighthouse, and he swears he saw the same."

"Leave that be; let's visit the Kuzhagar temple now, you and I."

"What about Sendhan Amudhan for an escort?"

"Let's not stand in the way of his endless search for his precious cousin. He may run after her as much as he chooses."

They set off duly towards the shrine; Raakkammal's knowledge of the region's bogs and quagmires was almost as complete as Poonguzhali's own, for she led her royal companion carefully around them. Soon they were at the temple, where the priest regarded them with unutterable astonishment.

"But what a surprise to find you here at this hour, *Rani*—and without a retinue in attendance! Could you not have informed me of your impending arrival?" He fluttered around, frazzled. "All might have been made ready for your visit—"

"These are hardly the times for protocol, retinues, or impressive entourages, are they, *Battare*? This kingdom has suffered its biggest calamity; hasn't Chozha Nadu lost its golden prince, the apple of everyone's eye, at sea?" Nandhini asked soulfully. "In fact, that explains my presence; I wish to pay my respects to Kuzhagar, and beg His grace towards the prince's safe deliverance."

"There is no need for worry, *Amma*, for it is not for us to suffer such a grievous loss," comforted the priest, truly moved. "Moreover, it is inconceivable that Ponniyin Selvar could be harmed in the slightest by Samudhra Rajan!"

"You seem very sure of yourself, *Battare*."

"The prince's birth star and horoscope cannot but inspire such faith, your highness. A man meant to rule as the Emperor of Emperors cannot be taken by the sea; therefore, cease your worry. Make your pleas to Kuzhagar, and He shall deliver the prince safe into our hands." He completed *deeparaathanai*—the holy ritual of bathing the deity in light—as he spoke, and offered her the customary pinch of *thiruneeru*, sacred ash. "Permit me to make known my intense satisfaction at your present exalted status, *Ammani*."

Nandhini raised her eyes swiftly in astonishment. "Did you know me before this, then?"

"Indeed, *Rani*, at Pazhaiyarai. I have seen you at the shrine on the banks of the Vaikai as well. And what is your brother Thirumalai up to, these days?"

“Wandering from town to village shrieking the *prabhandhams* of Azhwars, I should imagine. It’s been ages since I saw him.”

“He seems to harbour some bitterness upon the rift, *Amma*; he mentioned that you hadn’t allowed him to visit ever since you became the Ilaiya Rani of Pazhuvoor.”

“My husband’s family owes fierce allegiance to Siva Peruman—but what can be done, *Ayya*, when Thirumalai insists on calling himself the Servant of Azhwars; persists on expounding Vaishnavite philosophies and breaks the heads of Saivites? Doesn’t my loyalty to my lord and in-laws take precedence? How can I welcome a man who stands against my husband’s principles, even if he *is* my brother?”

“Indeed, *Thaaye*, indeed you owe your *pathi*, your lord and master obeisance; he and he alone has every claim upon you. Who cares about Azhwarkkadiyaan?” The priest abandoned the Vaishnavite and his concerns in a moment.

The ladies took their leave.

“Must you go alone, *Amma*?” ventured the Gurukkal. “If you should wait a moment, I might accompany you—”

“Not at all, *Ayya*, for this woman seems to know these parts very well, and I should hate to hasten you in the performance of your sacred duties. Besides, Kodikkarai is in uproar today, swarming with people; we shall be safe,” Nandhini assured him. Soon, both women were outside and once beyond the sight of the solicitous *Battar*, Raakkammal grabbed hold of Nandhini’s hands, leading her towards the rear.

They were upon the Thaazhai-hedged canal within moments and began to walk along its dense banks, finding their way by the light of stars.

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6

Poonguzhali's Panic

The *mandhiravadhi* and Nandhini may have been conversing in low tones but their speech was mostly audible to Poonguzhali, who listened with all her ears from behind the Thaazhai hedge, almost gasping with the effort to hold her breath.

“You’ve never given credence to my words at any time, *Rani*,” was the magician’s chagrinned reply, at Nandhini’s disbelief of his dramatic pronouncement. “*Now* what’s the reason for your distrust?”

“You’ve never heard of the prince’s powerful horoscope, have you? The Kuzhagar temple’s priest mentioned it as well, just a while ago.”

“Stuff and nonsense. The strength of my *mandhiram* far outweighs the tricks and stratagems of petty stars and planets. You know, I hope, that I was the one who conjured a powerful whirlwind on the tranquil seas, by my constant recitation? That Kanchi spy underestimated me too —doubtless he realized my true prowess as he drowned, and begged my pardon during his final moments!”

“And you know his death to be fact, do you?”

“So I didn’t actually see him die … what of it? His ship caught fire; I did see *that*.”

“The prince actually jumped into sea to save him from the burning ship, they say.”

“And did his so-called highness *return* from his watery expedition?”

“Not to the Pallavan’s ship—”

“There you are! Now you know why I spared Vandhiyathevan—so both our foes could depart this world simultaneously.”

“Bluster all you want but for some reason, I find it hard to believe you. A voice within whispers that they’re alive—do you know Poonguzhali?”

“But of course; an infernal nuisance in Ilankai. She may have been blown to pieces by the whirlwind as well.”

“Not her. Sometime ago, a boat was visible from a great distance, atop the lighthouse—Raakkammal saw it herself. It vanished suddenly, she claimed. It seemed to contain two or three people too.”

“You may as well leave then, with that old man in tow. We’ll see to things here.”

“Why mustn’t we stay?”

“Your aged husband will insist on escorting the prince with all royal honours—and everything we’ve struggled for will be ruined.”

“I’d rather like to know, myself, why they ought to die, *Mandhiravadhi*—because, if everyone’s agreed to crown Madhuranthakan—”

“Let’s not display our womanly ignorance now, shall we, *Rani*? The Kanchi spy knows all our secrets which, doubtless, would’ve been communicated to the prince by now. Leave before daybreak. Raakkamma, where would Poonguzhali conceal them in this forest?”

“There’s a *mandapam* hidden hereabouts; that’s her *andharanga vaasasthalam*, her secret abode. She hid that precious Kanchi spy for a whole day there, once—I found out only later.”

“Excellent. I know its location, so I’ll wait there. Meanwhile, *Rani*—what news of the Chakravarthy?”

“Which one?”

“This tongue shall never address sickly Sundara Chozhan by that title; I enquired about *ours*, of course.”

“News reached me ten days ago that he’s very well—ah, how long since I set eyes on him!”

“Be that as it may, leave now, quick! Wait—what’s that phenomenally dim-witted Pallavan up to?”

“We’ll be taking him as well, to Thanjai.”

“Careful, now.”

“There’s no need to worry about him—my slightest wish is his command.”

“Nevertheless, it won’t hurt to be on your guard. After all, you made a fool of yourself over the Kanchi spy Vandhiyathevan, didn’t you?”

“I may have slipped up a little with him, true—which is why I wish to see him alive, once more.”

“May as well consign such a wish to the flames, *Rani*.”

From the way their voices faded in and out, Poonguzhali guessed that they had begun to move mid-conversation, and tucked herself into the hedge more securely than ever. Thankfully, they made their way elsewhere with not even a glance in her direction.

Terror enveloped her normally clear mind as she realized the perils surrounding the prince. Her hands shook at the very thought of enemies hatching plots even now to destroy him; darkness seemed to cloud her vision; her throat went dry; heart skipped several beats. All that mattered now was that she reach the boat—and she set off almost at a run.

Arulmozhi Varmar was in the grip of a dangerous ague; Periya Pazhuvettarayar awaited his appearance to bind him in chains; assassins lurked in every corner to murder the prince; Nandhini, that beautiful witch, a *mohini pisaasu* aided them eagerly in every way—and Parthibendran was now the latest casualty of her treacherous net. Worse, they were even aware of her precious *mandapam*, where Poonguzhali had hoped to conceal the prince.

Now—now she’d seen for herself the lay of the land; *now* she understood that the terrible responsibility of saving the prince from the dangers threatening his person and escorting him to safety, lay upon her

slender shoulders. And with that realization came a feeling she'd never experienced before; a tumult of emotion that tumbled her into chaos.

For the first time in her splendidly confident life, she was terrified that she'd lost her way in the forest. She stared around, dazed; confusion seized her, along with the doubt that she was running in circles—and what if she stumbled across one of the prince's enemies on one of her mad perambulations? What was she to tell them—and more important, how was she to escape their clutches?

No, no, stop these muddled, pointless thoughts; I'm on the right track. There's the canal in which I rowed the boat and there's the spot where I anchored … Poonguzhali sprinted towards the place—and froze. Her heart almost stopped in horror—for the boat was missing. It wasn't where she'd left it. *Ayyo*—where had it disappeared?

Perhaps—perhaps Pazhuvettarayar's men had arrived in her absence ... could they have imprisoned the prince and his companion? That wasn't bad in itself, but what could be infinitely worse was if Vandhiyathevan had gone in search of the hidden *mandapam*, prince in his arms. If so, he'd walk straight into a den of bloodthirsty murderers—*Ayyayo, what have I done!*

Her heart seized; her mind faltered, pressing her to hurry towards the *mandapam* at once. She turned and plunged into the forest and again—again reared that wretched confusion; that sense of disorder, of running around in dizzying circles as though she were crossing the same place again and again.

Wait—what was that? Ayyo, that sounded—like footsteps—is someone following me? Who can it be—and why? What if it's that rogue mandhiravadhi? Well, why should I be afraid of ***him****? All I must do is take hold of the trusty knife at my waist—wait, I need fear no one—why should I flee?*

No, foolish girl; this isn't the time to grapple with foes; my hands lack strength and the knife might miss its target. I ought to safeguard my life at any cost; else what would be the prince's fate? What of Vandhiyathevan's endless warnings? And I promised him that I wouldn't endanger myself! Now I'll have to keep my word …

She plunged deeper and deeper into the dense forest, but the one behind still kept maddeningly at her heels.

Birds in the trees along her path fluttered and screeched in alarm; foxes erupted from burrows and scampered in directions they knew not; wild boars, disturbed from their slumber, dashed here and there in distress; a startled deer ran onto the path and bumped into her, tearing away in panic. Not all this uproar could shake her shadow, however; the *thump* of his footsteps and his heaving, shuddering breaths as he tried to keep up with her, assaulted her ears.

Then came a point when she stopped, exhausted—and fatigue turned, by swift degrees, into unimaginable fury. She would run no longer; it was time to halt, take a stand—and show her mettle to her unknown assailant.

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7
Song in the Forest

Just as Poonguzhali decided that she'd run enough and turned, furiously, to face her pursuer—there arose, most astonishingly, a melodious song within the gloomy woods.

"Ponnaar meniyane

Pulitholai araikkasaithu

Minnaar senjadai mel

Milir konrai aninthavane!"

She went into a peal of merry laughter the next instant, for realization hit that the voice could belong to none but Sendhan Amudhan. Such was her relief that a certain fact escaped her already over-wrought mind: the footsteps dogging her had actually come from another direction.

"Is that you, *Athaan*?"

"Indeed, Poonguzhali!"

"Come out from wherever you're hiding!"

"With pleasure," Amudhan's voice was followed, soon, by his slender person. "Here I am."

"You've certainly frightened me out of several years' growth, let me tell you. Why this relentless pursuit?"

"I travelled for days from Thanjai just for the pleasure of your charming company and your sweet songs—but not even here could I get the chance. I waited and waited, finally stumbling upon you quite by

accident. That was when I decided to pursue you—but do sing now, come!"

"A wonderful place to indulge in music—and an even better situation."

"If you won't, I certainly shall. Listen to me lift my voice and rouse every sleeping animal—I'll send them pelting in fear, I promise! Hark:

"Pitha! Piraisoodi Perumaane, Arulaalaa …"

"Enough, *Athaan*—do stop."

"Sing, then, won't you?" Abruptly, Amudhan's voice dropped several octaves to a sibilant whisper. "Someone else has been following you, Poonguzhali—I sang so loud to give you warning. He and your brother's wife have been conversing in secret this evening … you wouldn't happen to know him, would you?" And then, he raised his voice. "Well? What do you say? Will *you* sing, or shall I? After all, if Siva Peruman could dance among ghouls, why couldn't you sing to empty souls?"

"Now don't fly into a miff; of course I will," assured Poonguzhali, and straight away launched into song.

"Parakkum em killaigaal!

Paadum em poovaigaal!

Arakkann enaththakum

Adigal Aaroorarai

Marakka killaamaiyum

Valaikal nillaamaiyum

Urakkamillaamaiyum

Unartha valleerkagale!"

She dropped her voice as well. “How did you know that I’d returned, Amudha?”

“I saw a boat approach—from my vantage point atop the lighthouse—and guessed that it might be yours. I entered the forest, hoping to run into you—and almost did, into a few Pazhuvoor men. I couldn’t find you in the boat, but I did stumble upon my friend Vandhiyathevan and the prince. I informed Vallavarayan about Pazhuvettarayar’s men; the two of us carried his highness to the hidden *mandapam*.”

“*Ayyo*, what’ve you done! And what of the boat?”

“We worried that someone might stumble upon it, and overturned it into the stream. Now, why’ve you stopped?” This last in a loud tone, once again. “Go on, sing!”

“Alas, Amudha—I’ve forgotten the rest. But stay, isn’t there a hymn on Kodikkarai’s Kuzhagar? Do sing that one if you remember it.”

“How could I forget?” And straightaway, Amudhan launched loudly into the verse:

“Kadithaik kaatru vanthetrak karaimel

Kudithaanayale irundhaal kutramaamo?

Kodiyen kannkal kandana Kodik Kuzhageer

Adikel umakkaar thunaiyaaga irundheere!”

“*Athaan*,” whispered Poonguzhali, when it was done. “Has my pursuer gone? Or is he hidden somewhere hereabouts?”

“I haven’t heard footsteps ever since we stopped here—which means he’s probably crouched in the foliage nearby. Do you know him?”

“Certainly I do,” Poonguzhali’s answer was loud. “Why wouldn’t I know Sundarar’s hymn on Kodikkarai’s owls? Here it is:

“Kaaden mikavaal idhu kaarigai anjak

Koodip pondhil aandhaikal kookai kuzhara

Vedith thondar saalavum theeyar sazhakkar

Kodik Kuzhagaa vidankoyil kondaaye!”

See, Amudha? Owls hooted in these forests in Sundarar’s time too —but *men* imitate them in ours. I heard such a voice just some time ago —you wouldn’t know anything about such evil, devious plotters, *theeya sazhakkar*, would you?” All this in stentorian tones. “I wonder if I can imitate an owl’s call just as well. I’ll try, shall I, Amudha? You can tell me if I’m doing it right.” Swiftly, she raised her voice in a hoot thrice.

“Pitch perfect,” Amudhan praised. “Where did you learn to produce such a raucous sound in a honeyed voice that can sing divine hymns, Poonguzhali?”

“A *mandhiravadhi*’s training. Apparently, you’ve got to master an owl’s call to make sure your spells work.”

“Do you know magic, then?”

“Some little, I’ll admit. What about testing my prowess?”

“Test it—how?”

“Someone is concealed in the shrubbery nearby, listening to our conversation right now. Search, if you wish.”

No sooner did the words leave Poonguzhali’s lips than came a rustling sound—and *mandhiravadhi* Ravidasan erupted from behind a dense bush, accompanied by a harsh, insolent “Ha – ha – ha!” that seemed to shake the earth.“Is that how it is, my girl?” He leered. “And here I was, thinking that tricks and *thandhiram* were all you knew—but you’ve mastered *mandhiram* as well, have you?”

“Why, you scoundrel! So it’s you, is it?”

“Ah, you do know me.”

“Why not? You tried to murder the prince in Ilankai but couldn’t—so you cast a spell on the sea, wrought a whirlwind and drowned his highness and his companion!”

“You know that for a fact, do you? How? Did you see it all happen?”

“Their bodies were swept onto shore—and I had to bury them right there, in Boodha Theevu. You—you traitor! May lightning blast you and your wretched spells!”

“Don’t try to bamboozle me, Woman. Admit it: you countered mine with powerful ones of your own and brought them back to life, didn’t you?”

“*Ayyo*—how did you discover *that*?”

“Ravidasan has eyes other than the ones in his face—my mind harnesses the power of magic to witness events even a hundred *kaadhams* away.”

“Why badger *me*, then?”

“To test you, of course. Now, reveal their precious hiding-place like a good girl, won’t you?” Ravidasan sneered. “Else, I’ll burn you both to cinders!” And indeed, his eyes did glow like hot coals eager to incinerate anything in their path. “Well?” He demanded. “The truth now—or won’t you? *Om Hreem Hraam Vashat*! Wait—wait and see me unleash the terrible power of my *mandhiram*!”

Terrified, Poonguzhali clutched Sendhan Amudhan, almost shaking. “I’m going to make a run for it,” she murmured. “Stop him if you can.”

Aloud, she addressed the *mandhiravadhi*. “Don’t—don’t hurt me—I’ll show you where they are.” She began to walk in a direction exactly opposite the hidden *mandapam*. “Come—come along!”

Ravidasan made as though to follow, whereupon Sendhan Amudhan attempted to restrain him from behind.

Poonguzhali took to her heels.

The *mandhiravadhi* flung him aside negligently and swept after the girl, barely taking note of Amudhan tipping head over heels onto the forest floor.

Poonguzhali, for her part, bounded through the dense jungle like a startled deer.

Ravidasan sprinted in pursuit like a well-trained hunter—but regardless of his speed, it was no easy task to get hold of her.

Just as he was beginning to think that it might not be a bad idea to give up this fruitless chase, Poonguzhali stumbled to a stop as though exhausted—and the *mandhiravadhi*'s hopes received a fresh lease of life; he pounded after her again.

A good way behind them, struggling to catch his breath, staggered Sendhan Amudhan, wondering often if a detour to the hidden *mandapam* and a word of timely warning would have effect—but leaving his cousin to the devices of a devious scoundrel did not sit well with him either.

It was at this moment that Poonguzhali climbed a mound—not stopping with that, she turned to her pursuer and actually clapped to attract his attention. Ravidasan laboured to her side, heaving and panting, legs trembling with the exertion. His palms fairly itched to deliver four resounding slaps but just as he raised his hand, Poonguzhali gave a shout: "Look—look at my lovers!"

He stared in the direction she pointed—and in front of him spread the same picture that Vandhiyathevan had once seen. *Gup*! *Gup*! shot bolts of fire from crevices in the swampy marsh and vanished just as quickly with a hiss and pop: *Kap*! *Kap*! And although Ravidasan was well aware of the science behind this terrifying phenomenon, he could still feel the hair rise on his neck, skin prickling with nervous fear.

"Well, *mandhiravadhi*? An expert in tricks and spells, aren't you?" Poonguzhali needled him. "You see these marshland terrors, these *kollivai pisaasus*? They torture me endlessly with unwanted attentions—I wish you'd find a way to drive them out for good. Can you?"

Abruptly, Ravidasan felt wrath bubble up within him. “Trying to dupe me, you little wretch?” he growled.

“Why would I even attempt to?”

“After all your splendid promises to lead me to the prince and Vallavarayan—you’re not dragging me on a wild-goose chase, are you?”

“But you didn’t believe me when I revealed their fate. What else was I supposed to do?”

“The prince truly is dead, then? You swear it?”

“Such extreme measures … just look at the sky!”

Ravidasan promptly did, where his eyes caught the comet.

“Surely you know that it indicates death in the royal family?” Poonguzhali demanded, eyes wide. “Now it’s come true!”

“In that case,” Ravidasan gasped, “pass me that *gendi*, will you? If you’ve left something in it, that is. Chasing you all over the forest has made so thirsty …”

Abruptly, Poonguzhali scampered off the mound, making straight for the marshland with its terrifying fire-monsters.

Furious beyond measure now, Ravidasan lost his head. Gnashing his teeth, he leapt off as well, with just one thought in his maddened mind: *Get that girl, wrap your hands around her slender throat and choke the life out of her—!* And he dogged her heels, eager to carry out his vicious intent.

Having run industriously for a while, Poonguzhali stopped suddenly at one point, bent slightly, and stepped aside a few feet—but Ravidasan, blundering headlong, could not stop in time and actually shot past her at breakneck speed, skidding to a halt a good few feet ahead. He tried to turn in a vain attempt to grab her—but couldn’t. Why, what had happened to his legs? Why did they refuse to budge? Why did they feel so cold?

He blinked at his feet, mystified at the way the chill seemed to intensify. Why was it creeping up his soles? Why was it oozing up, up, up and slowly … wait, no—no! It wasn't the cold that was rising but quite the opposite: his legs were sinking—sinking down, down into the ground—

Ravidasan peered at his feet and—yes; they were descending by degrees into the swampy mud. Inch by agonizing inch, his legs were being sucked by the vicious, clinging marsh …

In an instant, he realized his peril and tried to climb out—but his efforts were fruitless: no matter how much he shook his legs, they simply wouldn't budge. It was as though an enormous, terrifying, devious demon dwelt under the surface, trying to pull him in, pore by pore.

"Well, *mandhiravadhi*?" Poonguzhali gurgled merrily. "What're you staring at? Caught in the jagged jaws of a *bhoodham*, are you? Why don't you spin one of your famous spells and simply walk out?"

Ravidasan trembled, partly from terror and partly, almost unbearable fury. "You—*you witch*…" he wrung his hands. "This is all your doing, is it?"

"You wanted to wring my neck, didn't you?" she crowed. "Well, you can put your hands through the same treatment."

"I shan't harm a hair on your head, I promise," Ravidasan tried to throttle his anger; this was no time to shout threats. "Give me a hand and get me out of this, there's a good girl."

"Give *you*—a hand?" Poonguzhali uttered a crack of laughter again. "Ha—what a hope! That won't work with me. Why don't you yell for all the ghosts and ghouls supposed to be at your beck and call? They're sure to help!"

By this time, Ravidasan had sunk almost to his thighs. His face was terrifying to behold, eyes blazing red like burning coals. Growling with desperation, he stretched his hands towards land, grabbing the base of hardy *korai* grass and tried to pull himself out with all his strength—to no avail. His buried legs wouldn't budge an inch.

“Mercy!” Ravidasan’s voice rose in a loud, mournful lament. “Won’t you take pity on me and save a soul, Girl?”

Sendhan Amudhan, who had stumbled up to them by this time, realized the magician’s predicament in an instant. His eyes softened almost against his will, revealing something akin to pity.

“Come along, Amudha,” Poonguzhali said dismissively.

“*Ayyo*, are we just going to abandon him to his fate?”

“Would you rather stay and watch until he’s been swallowed completely by the bog?”

“What—no, certainly not. It’s just that, well … I’ll be plagued by nightmares all my life if we leave him so. Let’s at least drag the man back to land.”

“He tried to strangle me, *Athaan*.”

“And God will punish him suitably. Now, let’s save him, shall we?”

“Since you insist …” Poonguzhali sighed. “Hand over your top cloth.”

Amudhan promptly obeyed and she knotted one end around the base of a sturdy shrub near the quagmire, throwing the other to the stranded *mandhiravadhi*. “Hold on to this cloth, you hear? Don’t tug too hard, or the bush will be torn off its roots. Just keep a light touch and wait until dawn. Someone might come along during the day, and pull you out.”

“*Ayyo*, am I supposed to spend the whole night, this way? I couldn’t —I couldn’t! You might as well kill me right away—”

Poonguzhali ignored these piteous lamentations, turning away almost at once, practically dragging Sendhan Amudhan by the hand and running back the way they’d come. The *mandhiravadhi*’s terrified moans and groans dogged their heels until they scrambled over the mound and for a while after they had crossed it.

“You arrived in the nick of time, *Athaan*,” began Poonguzhali, once his howls faded away, thankfully. “How did you, by the way? And why?”

“I found that I couldn’t stomach Thanjavur after my enforced accommodation in the dungeons,” Amudhan admitted. “Especially as Pazhuvoor spies and soldiers kept harassing me at odd intervals. Pazhaiyarai seemed a better option and I travelled there; Kundhavai Devi informed me of the terrifying perils surrounding the prince—which had multiplied manifold—and charged me with a message for Vandhiyathevan to escort Arulmozhi Varmar safe to Naagai’s Choodamani Viharam, and return only then. There was my own wish as well, to meet you and enjoy your songs—”

“A pretty time you chose too! But Ilaiya Piratti’s concerns are valid indeed—there’s no end to the dangers threatening his highness. As if all the foes in the world weren’t enough, he’s been infected with a horrible ague—”

“So I saw; it was the two of us who carried him to the hidden *mandapam*—and that was no easy task, let me tell you. But the *bikshus* at Choodamani Viharam are well-trained in medicine, Poonguzhali; they’re sure to cure him.”

“And how are we to get him to Nagapattinam, pray?”

“Through the canal, of course.”

“How do you propose we do that, considering you’ve kindly overturned my boat?”

“What’s in the water can be retrieved, you know.”

“We’ll have to start tonight, then—but how on earth are we all to fit into that small craft?”

“Unnecessary; we’ve decided the issue: Vallavarayan shall go to Pazhaiyarai while you and I escort the prince to Nagapattinam by water.”

A thrill of sheer exhilaration! Poonguzhali shivered at the very idea of yet another journey with the prince—in a boat, on the canal, all the way to Naagai to boot! *Dear God, may no danger threaten us; may we complete this perilous journey in safety*.

Soon they were in the vicinity of the concealed *mandapam*, and Amudhan clapped briskly.

“Who’s there?” Vandhiyathevan’s harsh voice rang out.

“It’s I, Sendhan.”

“Who else?”

“My cousin.”

Vandhiyathevan tiptoed to the *mandapam*’s entrance and peered outside cautiously. “No one besides you two?”

“No. Why the doubt?”

“Quietly, will you? The prince is asleep. Someone wandered hereabouts a while ago. I came out to take a look, thinking it might be you, but it wasn’t. Seemed to be the *mandhiravadhi*.”

“And then?”

“Your voice rose in song; what a moment to indulge in music, I thought. Thankfully, the *mandhiravadhi* heard it too and backtracked—did you run into him?”

“Indeed.”

“Well? What did you do with him?”

“Nothing—at least, I didn’t; Poonguzhali made him sink to his waist in a quagmire and left him to his fate.”

“I heard her voice as well, in fact.”

“She sang too.”

“It seemed to revive the prince a little. He asked to know the singer, and I answered that it was the boat-girl. He fell asleep listening to her song.”

Poonguzhali could not help but quiver again, in ecstasy.

“It wasn’t just singing; didn’t you hear her hoot like an owl?”

“So I did. Made me wonder about the stirring events in the forest tonight; I was amused at the *Vasanthorchavam*, the spring festival *Athaan* and cousin seemed to celebrating with such abandon—”

Poonguzhali shook herself. “Why on earth are we gabbing pointlessly, now?”

“We’ll have to pass the night somehow,” Vandhiyathevan shrugged.

“That’s just what we can’t do. We’ll have to start right away; leaving after daybreak will be almost impossible.”

From somewhere, far away, drifted the raucous baying of jackals—and in their midst, the mournful cry of an owl. Sendhan Amudhan trembled as his fertile imagination conjured an image of hapless Ravidasan mired in the mud, surrounded by ferociously growling predators howling like Death, eager to devour him—while the *mandhiravadhi* kept mimicking owls in a desperate bid to keep them at bay.

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Vandhiyathevan and Sendhan Amudhan gently carried the prince, careful not to rouse him, while Poonguzhali dogged them like a shadow. The moon had risen by the time they reached the banks.

They rested their precious burden against a tree and while Poonguzhali stayed by his side, the men waded into the canal, raised the submerged boat with a great deal of difficulty, and dragged it to shore.

The prince chose to open his eyes during the proceedings. “Thirsty …” came his voice, low and very weak.

Poonguzhali, alert to his every movement, instantly raised the *gendi* and poured some milk into his mouth.

He drank it eagerly, and raised his eyes to look at her with some difficulty. “Is that you, Poonguzhali?” He murmured. “I thought … I thought you were a celestial maiden in Devalokham, offering me delicious nectar.”

•

8
“Ayyo, Pisaasu!”

The divine *Karpaga* tree showered vivid, fragrant blossoms upon Poonguzhali; celestial *Kinnari* musical instruments sprinkled melodious, honeyed songs … why, her very nerves and veins transformed into the strings of a harmonious *yazh* and flooded her being with heavenly music—and all this, this intoxication the result of a few heartfelt words from the prince.

“I’m no *Devalokha* maiden your highness, but a simple boat-girl,” she remonstrated mildly. “What you’ve drunk isn’t the nectar of the Gods either but *paalaamudham*—milk-offering from the Kuzhagar temple.”

“You didn’t really think I’d believe that, did you?” protested the prince. “Aren’t you the divine daughter of Varuna Bhagavan himself? How many times you’ve saved my life, Samudhra Kumari,” he sighed. “How am I ever to repay you?”

“By allowing this poor servant to remain by your side a day and a night more,” begged Poonguzhali.

“But how can that be?” he demanded. “I’m leaving for Pazhaiyarai at once—”

“No; we’ve received news that you’re supposed to be escorted to Nagapattinam.”

“Have you? From who?”

“Ilaiya Piratti, of course.”

“Who’s that other one, over there? Dragging the boat with Vandhiyathevan?”

“My cousin Sendhan Amudhan; he was the one who brought news from your sister—about taking you to Choodamani Viharam in

Nagapattinam."

"Ah, has she changed her mind, then? Finally given up on dragging me to the throne? I've always wanted, you see, to join a Buddhist Sangam—I shall become a bikshu and journey to lands faraway! Saavakam—Kadaaram—Mayirudingam—Maapappaalam—China! I can hardly believe my good fortune … come, Poonguzhali—what're you waiting for?" And the prince stood up.

She stared at him, suspecting that this frenzied speech was the effect of blazing fever; Arulmozhi Varmar wasn't himself.

A long, loud moan reached them that very instant, from afar.

The prince paused mid-step, startled. "Who was that, Poonguzhali?"

She hesitated. "Just an owl, *Ayya*."

"That voice was human—the desperate cry of someone in grave danger … let's save him before we leave; after all, a good deed before I join the Buddhist Sangam would be worthwhile—" He bounded forward in an attempt to run but crumpled to the ground suddenly, his strength spent. Poonguzhali jumped up and cradled him in her arms.

The men ran up, hefted the prince who had lost consciousness again, and carried him gently into the boat, within which they made sure he lay in relative comfort.

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As the small craft began to make its ponderous way, everyone besides the prince jostled for space.

"There's no way this boat can take four people at once, Poonguzhali," Vandhiyathevan spoke up, finally. "I'm supposed to take my leave any way, and it would be better if I did so now. On you rests the responsibility of escorting the prince to safety—but there's no need to emphasize that, I know."

His voice was husky with emotion and the moon's pale rays, settling upon his face for a fleeting instant, betrayed the pearls glistening in his

eyes.

“You could wait until we’re beyond the forests of Kodikkarai,” Sendhan Amudhan suggested. “My horse is tethered there as well—you’d recognize it, I think.”

“Far better that I get down here; rest for a while in the Kuzhagar temple *prahaaram*, perhaps, and be on my way before dawn,” Vandhiyathevan sighed. “Or I shan’t be able to move a step tomorrow. And who knows what perils may waylay me later on?”

“You’d better take this, then.” Poonguzhali handed something she had bundled safely at her waist. “Offerings from the selfsame Kuzhagar temple. Make a meal of this, and get some sleep.”

“And what about you? Neither of you has eaten a morsel.”

“A *kaadham* past Kodikkarai and there’re scores of villages along this canal; Sendhan and I are capable of scrounging for food, somehow—but your circumstances are different: aren’t you supposed to get to Pazhaiyarai without anyone being the wiser?”

“A rule that applies to you too: never forget that this little boat carries the prince.”

“Why would anyone suspect such a thing? We know our responsibility, don’t worry; this flimsy boat isn’t going to attract anyone’s attention.”

“Very well, then; time to bid farewell.”

A long, mournful moan echoed again, at that moment. “What—what was that?” murmured the prince, before losing himself to the blazing onslaught of fever.

“I cannot,” Poonguzhali rose. “His highness will never forgive me if he knew that I … wait awhile, will you? I’ll return once I’ve freed that *mandhiravadhi* from his quagmire. It’s not far from here …” she leapt onto the banks as she spoke.

“I shall accompany you,” Sendhan Amudhan said, promptly. “You don’t think I’ll leave you to his mercy, do you?”

“No, Amudha; take care of the prince. I shall go with her,” offered Vandhiyathevan. “I’ve some unfinished business with that man as well.” And he bounded after Poonguzhali in hot pursuit.

A morbid, terrifying picture of the *mandhiravadhi* mired to his chest in the swamp while bloodthirsty jackals bayed around him, trying to nip fleshy morsels when they could, rose in Poonguzhali’s mind. Interspersed were visions of the prince’s eyes boring into her soul; *You wretched murderer!* He pointed at her, accusation and disappointment warring in his eyes. She ran like the wind, fertile imagination powering strong legs and before she knew it was at said swamp—and discovered, to her crushing dismay, that the *mandhiravadhi* was nowhere to be found.

Vandhiyathevan, at her heels, saw her hesitate and asked the reason. “Perhaps it’s another mire,” he suggested, when she told him. “Kodikkarai is riddled with them, after all—you could’ve been mistaken.”

Too shaken to even speak, poor Poonguzhali pointed to Sendhan Amudhan’s cloth, one end of which was still tied to a shrub.

“Think he’s been taken by the swamp? Impossible!” Vandhiyathevan stepped forward and yanked off the cloth. “That man has a hundred lives; no easy task to snuff him out…” He spoke to ease Poonguzhali’s mind but his own sentiments were markedly different. *Ravidasan must have met his end, surely*, his mind reasoned. *A fitting death for that wretched bastard.*

Realizing that there was no point in standing and staring by the edge of the mire, the duo retraced their steps to the canal.

Trees grew thickly, shrouding that section of the banks effectively; two figures could be seen half-cloaked by the darkness, holding onto a branch, peering intently through the gloom. One was male; the other female.

“Over there,” pointed Poonguzhali.

“Know who they are?”

“One’s the *mandhiravadhi*; the other is my brother’s wife. Clearly she beat me to him.”

“Excellent.”

“Not at all—they’re staring their eyes out at the approaching boat!”

One of the figures turned suddenly and peered in their direction, as though sensing their arrival. The next instant, both vanished into the shrubbery.

“*Ayyo*, they’ve seen us too!”

“Quiet! Come along; I’ll figure a way out of this,” Vandhiyathevan promised. “Don’t be surprised at anything I say—just follow my lead.”

They strolled towards the probable location of the hidden figures, walked past and sat at a little distance, by the canal. Vandhiyathevan made sure that those skulking would find it easy to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“I really don’t see why you should worry, Poonguzhali,” he opened his gambit. “The *mandhiravadhi’*s gone; good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.”

“But what a horrible death,” she sighed.

“What a thing to say, my girl, after having gone to such lengths to murder him.”

“*Ayyo*—you’re blaming me?”

“Who else led such a pretty dance and drew him into the mire? Why you must suddenly be afflicted by pity and attempt to save him, I’ll never know … but the bog had claimed its victim by then. I do have my doubts about your motives, though: was it rescue on your mind—or merely a wish to make certain of his death?”

“No one asked you to come yapping at my heels.”

“I wouldn’t have seen your true colours if I hadn’t, you—you wretched *murderer*!”

“Who—me?”

“Indeed … and well, I’m not entirely blameless either, in this business. I murdered the prince by drowning him in the sea; you trapped the *mandhiravadhi* in a marsh—so we’re quits, I suppose. Don’t breathe a word of my kill, and I shall extend you the same favour.”

“So *you’re* the prince’s assassin? You swore just a moment ago that you hadn’t set eyes on him.”

“I had my motives, but there’s no more reason to lie to you. Come, now, accept my condition.”

“And if I should refuse …?”

“I’ll be left with no choice but to make my way to Nandhini Devi and inform her that you’re the *mandhiravadhi*’s murderer. Remember: there’s no witness for my deed but there is, for yours …”

“What could that woman possibly do?”

“Nothing much except bury you in the ground up to the neck and make an elephant tread on your head and squash it like a—”

“*Ayyo*, how terrible!”

“Indeed. *Now* will you accept my condition?”

“What must I do?”

“See that boat your cousin is rowing towards us? Get into it; the two of you must leave for Ilankai at once. There, you can mourn your precious prince as you please –”

“Why, though? What’s it to you if I remain?”

“Ah, and have you rat me out to Pazhuvettarayar, I suppose! Say what you will, but that old man has a soft corner for the prince and might

try to take revenge on me—but I'm not ready for that yet; there are a few tasks left, in this world."

"At least tell me why you killed the prince, you rogue!"

"I've no objection; that wretched royal and his precious sister conspired to seize a throne that's my master's by rights; Aditha Karikalar's enemies are mine—now you know."

"You won't escape the consequences of this dastardly deed."

"None of your concern, Girl. Come: will you, or won't you accept my proposition?"

"I don't seem to have a way out, do I? There's the boat; I shall get into it."

"Now listen: the moment you do, steer towards the sea. Turn to Kodikkarai and you'll wish you'd never been born. I shall be observing you from here, and will leave only when I'm convinced that you've obeyed."

"As you please—and may a hundred jackals shred you to pieces!" At his signal she rose, hastened towards the boat and climbed in swiftly.

The small craft bobbed away.

Vandhiyathevan stayed where he was, as promised.

Half a *naazhigai* crept by.

The boat drifted a long way on the canal, before disappearing into the darkness.

Abruptly, a horrifying cackle sounded from somewhere behind Vandhiyathevan: "***Ha—ha—ha!***"

The Vaanar warrior managed a very creditable performance of being startled, and jumped up.

The *mandhiravadhi* rose to his full height amidst the scrubby bushes and roared with laughter, the demonic sound ripping through the forest like a ghoul's mad cackle.

Vandhiyathevan dared one look at this terrifying spectacle. "*Ayyo, pisaasu*!" he shrieked at the top of his voice, and took to his heels.

•

9

Three in a Boat

Dawn broke over the heavens. Lady Night, that dark beauty, was loath to leave her lord, the Earth—but the laws of the universe were rigid; depart, she must. Her lovely, slender arms—arms that had been twined around her love—fell away gently; she pressed her lips to his as though indulging in the last ever kiss of her life—but lingered, still. “Go, now, sweetheart,” soothed her heart’s beloved. “Our separation is but four *jaamams* long and no more; we shall meet at dusk this very day. Be of good cheer!” And yet Lady Night hesitated, her steps lagging, turning again and again as though to catch a last look at her knight before she finally vanished.

As a heartless, hypocritical lover with no thought for his mate, Earth shivered with ecstasy at Night’s departure. “Ah, sweet freedom!” chirped a thousand and thousand birds as they swung into the crisp morning air; fragrant buds burst into bloom on trees and bushes. Bees arrived in a large, buzzing swarm from nowhere and surrounded the unfurled flowers, their chorus swelling to a melodious crescendo at the prospect of sweet nectar. Dragonflies flew in every direction, their delicate, translucent wings touched with every shade of colour in the universe.

The eastern horizon glowed with a touch of gold; star-lamps all over the sky faded and finally winked out. The crescent moon, gallivanting across the heavens in his celestial chariot thus far, hesitated. *Do I stay? Or leave?* The question seemed to tremble on his lips.

Meanwhile the boat drifted slowly, along the little stream. The *plash-plash* of oars cleaving through water jostled for attention with the uproarious chorus of birds in Poonguzhali’s ears, and she awoke with a start. Her limpid eyes fluttered open like two beautiful, deep blue buds unfurling upon a branch instantaneously. The prince’s golden countenance was the first to meet her sight. *Still asleep*, she mused.

Wait, was he? Or sunk fathoms deep in fevered oblivion? She didn't know but ah, how handsome —such glowing, radiant features!

Further away sat Sendhan Amudhan, rowing placidly. "Awake so early, Poonguzhali?" He asked. "Sleep awhile yet, won't you?"

She smiled—and it wasn't just her lips that did; her whole body seemed to blossom into a lovely beaming smile. All her life had been spent in the jungle and yet, birdsong and buzzing bees had never quite seemed so melodious or even harmonious, until this morning. "Sing in *udhaya raagam*, *Athaan*," she entreated. "Sing to the tune of glorious dawn."

"As if I'd dare, in your presence," he protested. "Yours should be the song."

"What about your performance last night? In the middle of the forest?"

"That was for a purpose. *You* must sing, now."

"I'd quite like to—but wouldn't it disturb his highness?"

"Not at all, I assure you," came Arulmozhi Varmar's voice. "You can both sing. I've no objection."

Poonguzhali blushed and hung her head, overcome with bashfulness.

"Where's this boat going?" the prince asked, next.

"Choodamani Viharam in Naagai," she answered.

"But—everything I heard and saw last night; was it all real?" He demanded. "Not a dream?"

"Indeed no, *Ayya*. Look—here's the man who brought news from your sister."

"Tell me everything Ilaiya Piratti said, Amudha—go on. She's given me instructions to join the Buddhist Sangam, hasn't she? Isn't that so?"

Even as the boy hesitated about an answer, the clip-clop of horse-hooves startled the cousins.

The prince's expression, however, sported no change. "My friend the Vaanar warrior—where's he?" he asked in a fading voice, and closed his eyes.

Vandhiyathevan himself made an appearance soon, astride his horse.

The boat slowed and stopped.

Vallavarayan descended in turn, and approached them. "Nothing of importance, really—I merely wanted to make sure of your safety. There's no more danger."

"The *mandhiravadhi*?" Poonguzhali ventured.

"Doesn't have a clue about the prince's presence on this boat; believed everything I spouted."

"You saw him, then?"

"Yes—but I shrieked, howled and made a blustering, terrified pretence of having seen his ghost."

"I've never known anyone who could lie like you."

"Call it the superior power of a fertile imagination, rather. Now, how's the prince?"

"Wakes up now and again; mutters a couple of words and then loses consciousness."

"The hallmark of a fever such as this."

"How long does it last?"

"A month even, sometimes. Get him safe to Choodamani Viharam; the *bikshus* will cure him in two weeks. But careful, Poonguzhali—it's *you* I trust to keep the prince safe; the slightest glimpse of a temple *gopuram*

and your precious cousin might wander away, singing a *thevaram* hymn to boot!"

"Oh, I don't do things like that, now that I've met you," Amudhan assured. "I'm not even as interested in Siva worship, these days."

"The truth, now: is that on my account or this young woman?"

Sendhan Amudhan appeared not to hear this and changed tack. "Did you find the horse where I said?"

"Other way around; it found me. This is the steed I left behind in Thanjai, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It caught sight of me within the dense jungle and neighed. One thing I did learn as a result of being nabbed by those Arabs, Amudha; it's a crime to leave our horses barefoot—bare-hooved, rather. They ought to be shod with iron. I'm going to stop at the first ironsmith's forge I see, and get that done … well, there's no time to be wasted in trivialities. I mightn't have the chance to meet you and his highness again—but if he wakes, make sure to tell him that I'm on my way to Pazhaiyarai, and that I'll send word from there soon. That ought to be the only thing to afford him some relief, I should think."

He turned his horse upon the words and soon, vanished from sight.

***

The boat drifted along a stream lined densely on both sides with Thaazhai bushes studded with golden and ivory blooms by turns. Their thick, heady fragrance was intoxicating. *Punnai* and *Kadamba* trees grew here and there; their flowers, one glowing with pearly translucence and the other a deep, blushing red of vermilion, lay scattered on the banks. If there ever was a divine path meant to carry virtuous beings from earth to heaven, mused Poonguzhali, it would be this.

Sometimes, they stopped at the sight of a village; Amudhan procured milk for the prince and food for Poonguzhali.

That young maiden always took care to stand a little apart whenever Arulmozhi Varmar awoke; her eyes darted here and there, unable to meet his. But when he was unconscious—ah, it was different then; she spent all her time gazing at his face. She conversed with Amudhan too and sometimes, the cousins sang hymns, to their mutual delight.

Sendhan Amudhan's departure to villages nearby was the signal for Poonguzhali to begin her ministrations to the prince; she sat by him for hours on end, caressing his forehead or carding his hair with gentle fingers. Her heart swelled with a sort of indescribable ecstasy during those moments; her being seemed to float in a sea of a deep, delightful contentment. She was in a state of bliss.

A sense of déjà vu possessed her sometimes, as though she had served him thus in scores of births. A thousand formless, featureless memories swept like agitated birds through her heart, fluttering fragile wings in deep, dark shadows.

And so they travelled for a day and a night, taking turns to doze and even then, vague but colourful dreams flitted through Poonguzhali's subconscious, turning her dreamscape into a wonderland.

The world gleamed with a golden radiance at sunrise the next morning, when the boat finally reached Naagai; a little ahead of town, the stream branched into a smaller canal that lead straight to Choodamani Viharam. They pursued this route and in due course, arrived behind it.

The monastery seemed to be drowning in chaos that morning, for the muted roar of people shouting at the entrance penetrated even here, and *bikshus* themselves were scurrying hither and thither.

The trio climbed out of the boat. Sendhan Amudhan volunteered to learn the cause of the disturbance and left at once.

•

10

Choodamani Viharam

You know, don't you, that sea claimed the ancient Chozha capital of Poompuhar—also known as Kaverippattinam? In the centuries that followed, Naagai managed to gradually gain ascendance as a port of some renown. The number of foreign kingdoms eager to trade with a land blessed with an abundance of natural wealth as the one nurtured by River Ponni was not insignificant, and there was no counting the huge vessels that docked at port, laden with goods of every kind. Aside from pearls, gems, diamonds and perfumes, horses of excellent pedigree also arrived for sale.

Naagai had made a name for itself as a city of superior architectural attractions even during the times of Sri Sundaramurthy Naayanar; Nambi Arurar, upon glimpsing it, promptly burst into song at its descriptive best:

"Kaanbiniya Manimaadam niraindha nedu veethik

Kadal Naagaik Kaaronam Meviyirundheere!"

And do you know the valuables Sri Sundaramurthy Naayanar audaciously listed to the deity Kaayaarohana Peruman, residing in state in Kadal Naagai Kaaronam? Aside from mundane items such as precious gems; outrageously priced silks and ornaments worth a king's ransom, he also demanded a high-bred stallion!

"Nambithaamum annaatpoi

Naagaik kaaronam paadi

Ambon manippoon navamanikal

Aadai saantham adarparimaa …"

The Periya Puraanam further informs that he did receive said gifts, before leaving for Thiruvaarur. Perhaps he felt an overpowering desire to ride one of the famed Arab horses that had just arrived in the ships docked at Naagai!

Intriguing Puraanic descriptions apart, there is a wealth of historical evidence as well on the city, supplied by inscriptions and copper-plates.

"***Nagapattinam—a town of many temples, chathirams, water-bodies, groves and streets lined with beautiful buildings***," proclaim the Anaimangalam copper-plates with much enthusiasm. The same inscriptions also describe, in some detail, the Buddhist monastery situated in the city—Choodamani Viharam—and its varied, colourful history.

***

The peninsula we know as Malay these days was then the illustrious Sri Vijaya Kingdom with Kadaaram, its prominent city. The Sailendhra dynasty had long ruled from this, their capital, over a magnificent empire spreading in all directions; one of their scions, ***Magaradhvajan Choodamani Varman*** proved to be a most gracious and magnificent king. The Anaimangalam Plates describe him in magniloquent terms as "***a master strategist; equal to the Sura Guru Brihaspathi in intellectual prowess; a radiant Sun looked up to by scholars, the Sunflowers; a veritable Karpaga tree, granter of boons to those in need***."

The son of this great king, ***Maara Vijayothunga Varman***, inform the copper-plates further, made sure his father's name endured for eternity by "***establishing a monastery of the stature of Mount Meru in Naagai, henceforth known as Choodamani Viharam***."

***

Readers might wonder at the rationale behind Maara Vijayothungan of Kadaaram journeying all the way to Naagai of all places, to build a Buddhist monastery.

Sri Vijayam was one of those foreign empires that had forged bonds of trade and commerce with Chozha Valanadu over a considerable period of time; many its citizens, who had made Naagai their home, while others visited on a frequent basis. The king of Kadaaram and his subjects were of the Buddhist faith; the former established a monastery so the latter suffered not a lack of places to worship … perhaps he was motivated by another reason as well: Buddhism had originated, after all, in Bharatham.

Tamil kings followed a time-honoured tradition of religious tolerance; it was no surprise that the establishment of Choodamani Viharam was graciously permitted—but not stopping with that, grants were offered in the form of tax-free lands whose income could be used to liberally fund the monastery, along with *nivanthams*—donations in cash or kind.

(***Kalki's Note***: In the years following the period of this story, Emperor Raja Raja Chozhan made over the village of Anaimangalam as well as many others in the vicinity completely tax-free to Naagai's Choodamani Viharam. This momentous grant was authorized and inscribed in copper-plates by his son, the emperor who would take Chozha dynasty to its greatest, golden heights, Rajendra I. These would later come to be known as the ***Anaimangalam Copper-plates***: twenty-one leaves, each fourteen inches by five in dimension, connected by a large copper ring. In recent times, they have crossed the seas and are now part of an exhibition in Leiden, Holland. Certain historians have named them the ***Leiden Plates***, for this reason.)

Saivism had been the favoured faith of Chozha kings after Vijayalayan; Adithyan, Paranthakan and Kandarathithan had all been renowned for their piety and the various good works to Saivite temples that marked their respective reigns—but none had cherished the slightest hatred for other faiths; no matter the religious propensities of their subjects, all were governed without partiality and accorded equal rights. Sundara Chozhar for his part went several steps ahead of his ancestors and sanctioned privileges to Buddhist institutions, raising the spirits of followers while Prince Arulmozhi Varmar's generous act of renovating crumbling monasteries in Ilankai sent them into a state of delirious joy.

Considering its illustrious past and present exalted status, why would the *viharam* descend into such confusion and chaos? Why were its *bikshus* scuttling here and there in such anxiety? The raucous shouts and agitated cries at the entrance—what prompted those? Well, nothing will do but for us to dog Sendhan Amudhan's footsteps, to find out.

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We mentioned, didn't we, about the trio following the stream that led straight to the rear, nay, almost within the complex of Choodamani Viharam? On arrival, however, Amudhan could find no one and traced hesitating steps, stumbling in unfamiliar surroundings. Somehow, he finally found himself at the front door where was situated Buddha Bhagavan's *chaithyam* or shrine, meant for the use of the public. Devotees had arrived for worship at that early hour, bearing plates laden with *shenbagam* flowers, lotuses, and other paraphernalia—but many seemed to have forgotten the purpose of their visit entirely. *Bikshus* stood atop the steps that led into the *chaithyam*; Amudhan glimpsed a man at a lower level, seemingly addressing them. Some of the monks, he realized, looked to be on the verge of tears while many devotees, instead of customary chants of "*Saadhu*! *Saadhu*!" were stammering horrified exclamations: "*Ayyo*! *Aha*! *Adada*!" and lamenting in earnest.

A few steps in their direction, and the circumstances were apparent to him: the man in conversation with the monks belonged to Parthibendran's vessel that had docked in Naagai the previous night—once on shore, the crew were quick to retail recent events: the terrible tale of the drowned prince lost nothing in its telling. Within a very short while news was all over town, and the head of the monastery had sent for one of the sailors to ascertain the truth or otherwise of these rumours. He recounted everything he knew. "The prince jumped into the sea at the height of the gale," his voice shook with grief. "And never came back." Shuddering sobs and mournful weeping arose from the crowd.

Tears sprang from the Acharya's eyes and coursed unchecked down his cheeks. His bowed head never rose; he walked with slow, lagging steps up the stairs, beyond the *chaithyam* and into the monastery. The rest of the monks followed and Sendhan Amudhan crept behind them, unobserved.

“Must *this* be Buddha Bhagavan’s holy grace?” The Head addressed his fellows with unmitigated sorrow. “Ah, the castles in the air I was conceited enough to build! Hark, you—I mentioned Prince Arulmozhi Varmar’s marvellous doings in Ilankai during an audience with the Chakravarthy in Thanjavur; Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai was present as well, lending a keen ear to my account. She sought a meeting with me later, and elaborated her ambition to open an *adhurasalai*, an infirmary in connection with this very *viharam*, promising the necessary *nivanthams* as well. But was that all? No indeed! *You may have heard a great deal of talk amongst people these days, Acharya*, said she. *Should the prince find himself in the situation of being a guest of Choodamani Viharam, could you accommodate him?* Naturally, my answer was swift. *If such an honour indeed be granted, Devi, we shall protect him as the eyelids guard the eye*. But now—what is the use of such a promise? Was it only the prince who was drowned at sea —ah, no; the hopes and desires, the *manoradham* of every good citizen of this land! Chozha *samrajyam* is lost—and I cannot understand how Samudhra Rajan could have ever allowed such a catastrophe!” He cried, voice hoarse with sorrow. “Will no one take this tyrant to task?”

Speechless, the rest wept as well, tears flowing down their cheeks.

A space of silence pervaded the chamber following the head’s impassioned, sorrow-laden words.

This, Sendhan Amudhan judged, would be the right time to announce his presence, and errand. He pushed through the monks and attempted to reach the Head, upon which he was immediately grabbed and stopped. “Why—who is this? How did he get in here?” Questions flew thick and fast as the *bikshus* whispered amongst themselves.

“This servant is named Sendhan Amudhan, *Ayya*. I hail from Thanjai, and wish to speak to the Head at once.”

“Speak,” several answered at once. “Speak now!”

“There is no secret that cannot be known to these men,” assured the chief of them, sensing Amudhan’s reluctance. “Proceed.”

“I’ve brought a patient, *Ayya*.”

“A patient, you say? What sort? What’s his affliction? Where have you left him?”

“The courtyard in the middle …”

“*Inside* the *viharam*? But how did you get here?”

“By the stream; I brought him on a boat. He suffers from terrible, chilling ague. If you could see to him at once …”

“Good God—*how* could you? This sort of shivering fever is contagious! Why must you bring him here, and at such a time too …”

“I’d believed all this time that Asoka Chakravarthy belonged to the Buddhist faith, Acharya. Now, I know that it isn’t so.”

“Do you? Why?”

“I caught sight of an Asoka *Sthambam* near Kanchi, and inscribed upon it was one of Buddhism’s principal tenets: to care for the sick. And yet you drive me away…”

Acharya *Bikshu* glanced at the rest. “I had better see to this now, I think; wait until I return with further news.” He turned to Amudhan. “Come, *Appane*.”

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A young man and a woman—a *yuvan* and a *yuvathi*—stood by the stream in the middle of the *viharam*’s courtyard; Acharya was horrified at the sight. “How dare … do you not know that women are barred from these precincts? Even female monks, the *bikshunis* have been established in a monastery built especially for them …” He approached the couple as he spoke and took a keen look at the young man. His eyes widened.

To say that he was stunned, shocked and amazed would be an understatement. Acharya could not speak for many moments, caught as he was in the grip of incredulous delight. “Is this—this isn’t …” he paused, marshalling his thoughts into order. “It *is* Prince Arulmozhi Varmar, is it not?”

These words seemed to penetrate the prince's vague consciousness. "No indeed, Acharya—I'm not a prince—not at all! This girl here and that boy are trying to drive me out of my mind. I'm a boatman, I tell you! I even asked this young woman if she'd marry me; we could sail away to distant lands on her boat—and would you listen to the nonsense she spouted? *You were born to bring the whole world under your benevolent rule*, she blabbers! A poor fishing-girl ought not to aspire—*aspire*!—to wed me; she wishes my good health and nothing more! *I shall consider it an honour to delight in tales of your glorious victories*, she gabbles. Did you ever listen to such a farrago of nonsense? Am I the lunatic, or is she? Which one of us is afflicted by *sithabramai*, I ask you?"

Even as Amudhan whispered into Acharya's ears, that perceptive monk had realized that these were the wild mutterings of a man lost in the haze of searing fever; Kundhavai Devi's request also swam into his mind.

"The lad is indeed afflicted with a poisonous ague," he informed the rest of the monks. "Sending him out now would mean the start of an epidemic; thousands have perished in Ilankai as a result of this dreaded fever. I shall install him in my own room; the responsibility of nursing and medication shall be mine alone. As for his fevered ramblings," he looked carefully at his audience. "Dismiss them as such."

Acharya lost no time in approaching the prince and holding him up in a one-armed embrace; with Amudhan supporting the other, the group gently ascended the steps.

They'll have climbed the stairs in moments, Poonguzhali thought, gazing after the departing men. *The door would open; they would enter. The doors would close—and closed doors generally stay that way. I will never see him again.*

It went exactly as she had predicted: steps were ascended; doors opened; Acharya stopped Amudhan just outside and said a few words. The whole party trooped within.

Padaar! The doors closed as though slamming shut Poonguzhali's own heart.

I may never glimpse him again in this birth, she mused. *Will I ever have a chance in my next?*

She stood there for awhile, watching until the prince finally vanished from her sight.

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11

The Iron Forge

Vandhiyathevan spurred his horse into a smart canter, the very picture of confidence.

His destination was Pazhaiyarai and he'd set course without benefit of wayfarer's advice, for memory was clear enough about his journey from that city; he approximated his direction somewhat and steered his mount into the forest—only to discover soon enough that this posed untold difficulties to the poor animal.

Vallavarayan was exhausted, himself. It had been days since a proper night's sleep after all; aside from the few brief minutes he'd snatched here and there, nodding off in a vague state between rest and wakefulness, there had been precious little chance of leisure. Well, that could soon be remedied: delivery of news to Kundhavai in Pazhaiyarai about the latest developments and his responsibilities would be at an end. He could sleep—endlessly, even; sink fathoms deep into drugged slumber for all the days he'd lost so far, he mused, satisfied.

His thoughts flitted to the Chozha princess then, and the not inconsiderable satisfaction he'd derive while uttering those superb words: "Your commission has been carried out successfully, *Devi*,"—not to mention the delighted exhilaration that would suffuse that illustrious lady's countenance. The very notion shot a thrill of anticipation through his veins.

Other thoughts could not help but intrude, as well: the countless lies and fabrications he'd uttered ever since his journey from Kanchi, for instance. Such had been his situation, of course—but his heart and mind still shrank in humiliation. A few scant days in Prince Arulmozhi Varmar's company had wrought a sea-change in his sentiments.

There had been a time when he'd believed, quite sincerely, that those mired in politics needed all the tricks and stratagems of that wily

statesman, legendary Chanakya; in his heart of hearts had sparked a glimmer of hope—and well, why not admit it? Ambition, even—that someday, these very ruses might win him the kingdom of his ancestors and in its wake, their lost glory.

Those fantasies had vanished forever, now. Witnessing, firsthand, Prince Arulmozhi Varmar's remarkable honesty, integrity and steadfastness had given him a distaste—nay, almost a loathing for anything underhanded. Unwittingly, the memory of the barrage of lies he had spouted in the *mandhiravadhi*'s hearing last night in a bid to save the prince, rose in his mind. Good God, if something untoward occurred as a result of that nonsense …! His heart shuddered at the idea. If someone else should have heard them—if they were ever reported to Kundhavai Devi—not that she would believe them, of course … but heavens, what a catastrophe!

He would never put his fertile imagination to such evil use, he decided. No more untruths; no inventing colourful coils of lies; no *punaisuruttu*. His lips would always utter the truth and nothing but the truth, henceforth; consequences be damned. He would shoulder them, as well he ought. The Azhwarkkadiyaans and Ravidasans of this world could sully themselves with lies, spies that they were; why must *he*? The glorious victories won by steel, his sword, would be enough—even the loss of life in such endeavours mattered little. Yes, he would have to give up on *thandhirams* and *mandhirams* from now on.

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So lost was he in reverie that for a while, his horse's steadily slowing gait did not intrude into his consciousness—why, as an extension of remarkably deep thought he'd even managed to doze, swaying atop his steed. It was only when it stumbled and bent, at one point, did he jerk into wakefulness. His horse was staggering, unable to stand on one of its forelegs. Vandhiyathevan climbed down at once.

Patting the animal reassuringly, he leaned down to examine the seemingly lame limb—and discovered the presence of a small, sharp pebble that had almost bored through the hoof. He teased out the offending stone cunningly and disposed of it. Thankfully, the damage

wasn't serious; he patted his horse again and climbed back, remembering snatches of conversation between the Arabs on the ship:

"Crude, boorish Tamils forcing their horses to run bare-hooved without the slightest protection! How long do you think a stallion can survive without shoes?"

He mulled over these words as he rode slowly. Although it was the norm for soldiers to wear armour for protection in battle, iron horseshoes were a rarity indeed. And yet, this wasn't exactly news; such things were done in foreign countries—or so he had heard. Well, he would have to institute enquiries at the first iron forge he encountered; have this very horse shod, perhaps. Else the journey to Pazhaiyarai might well be impossible. Procuring another might prove difficult if this one fell lame midway—but how could he? Steal, maybe—*chee*! The very thought was shameful.

He steered the horse from the jungle path and managed to find his way more or less to the *rajapattai*; come what may, he must stick to the king's road. These regions could not hold anyone who knew him; the Pazhuvettarayar party would follow only later; likewise, the *mandhiravadhi*. No danger then; he might even stumble upon a forge on the main road, where he could pursue the quest of horseshoes.

His hopes were not in vain: a village appeared soon enough—seemingly thrumming with energy. Homes and streets were liberally festooned on one side; Periya Pazhuvettarayar's possible arrival may have spurred the villagers onto celebration. Well, he'd be very far away by the time lord and entourage appeared on the horizon.

On the other hand, though, the sight of anxious villagers—women, men, young and old—gathered in little knots, engaged in grave discussion snagged Vandhiyathevan's attention. Not that he could guess the subject of their restless, nervous conversation. Several, upon encountering a traveller on a horse, approached with the intention of stopping him. Vallavarayan, with no thought to embroiling himself in verbal altercations, spurred his steed into a gallop.

He spotted the forge on the outskirts, by the roadside. Unwilling to pass by, he reined his horse to a stop, descended, and went in.

An ironsmith was hard at work, accompanied by a boy blowing hard through a pipe. It seemed to Vandhiyathevan that someone whisked himself out by the back door the moment he stepped in—but this wasn't what caught both his eye and attention: no, it was the sword in the ironsmith's hands. And a rare, unique piece of weaponry it was, too. The man seemed to be working hard on it as well: while one side of the blade gleamed with silver radiance the other, just removed from the forge's fire, dazzled a molten red-gold, blinding in its brilliance.

Ha, Vandhiyathevan whispered to himself, awed. *Truly, a sword worthy of the name!*

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12

“Into the fire!”

So deeply was the ironsmith immersed in his work that it took the clearing of Vandhiyathevan’s throat rather loudly, twice or thrice, to finally garner his attention.

“Who might you be, *Appane*?” He demanded, raising his head. “What do you want—swords or spears? But there’s no need for such things these days, is there?”

“A pretty thing to say, *Ayya*—and you with a sword in your hands this very moment!”

“Ah, but this isn’t custom—just an unusual commission; someone wanted to spruce up an old blade. You ought to have been here a few years ago, during the Pandiya and Vada Pennai wars—swords and spears flooded this place, heaped like small, dangerous hillocks. Why, there was some demand for weapons at the beginning of the Ilankai war too—but no one needs them now; most come to dump old ones, hoping for a sale. Perhaps you’re here for the same reason?”

“Not at all; I’m afraid I need mine for awhile yet; I’ve some responsibilities to fulfill—but once they’re done, I shall pick up a pair of cymbals and wander on a Saivite pilgrimage, singing *thevaram* hymns with a glad heart. That might be the right time to donate my weapons to you, I think.”

“Why come, in that case?”

“I’ve been riding through hill and vale—and my journey is by no means over, yet. There seems to be a practice of making iron footwear for horses? Can you?”

“Such a tradition does exist in Arabia, yes; some have begun it here as well in recent times. I’ve some practice with such work.”

“Would you be able to shoe my horse?”

“A time–consuming task, *Thambi*—and one that can be taken up only when I’m done with my present job.”

Vandhiyathevan lapsed into thought. If he was fatigued, his poor horse was considerably worn out. It might be well to wait until it was shod, before he resumed journey.

“I shall stay here, then—but you’ll begin mine as soon as you finish the one on hand, won’t you?”

“Certainly; why ever not?”

For a few moments, Vallavarayan watched as the ironsmith repaired the sword with a fine hand. “Such splendid workmanship,” he remarked, presently. “Looks to be fashioned along royal lines too … whose is it?”

“The Harichandra River flows at a little distance from here, good fellow.”

“So I’ve heard; what of it?”

“It’s a custom of mine to bathe in it.”

“Wonderful. You may be assured of a great deal of virtue on your final journey.”

“Therefore, I’ve assumed another custom: to speak the truth as far as I can and not lie.”

“What objection could I have to this, pray? Why must you lie? I haven’t asked you to, have I?”

“If you could keep from asking me about this sword, I could refrain from lying about it.”

Aha, mused Vandhiyathevan. *So that’s how it is, is it?* Aloud, he said, “My lips are sealed. No questions shall tempt the breaking of your virtuous vows. Kindly complete your present task and take up mine, do.”

The ironsmith duly bent his head and lost himself in work, silent.

Vallavarayan stared at the sword for a while. His keen eyes spotted the delicate carving of a fish near the base, by the hilt; he straightened, astonished. What was its significance? Did the symbol have a purpose—or was it just for ornamentation?

The ironsmith placed the sword in the forge's fire again—specifically the emblem—and pounded hard. His purpose seemed to be to sear the fish out of existence.

Vallavarayan couldn't help but wonder about his motivations, but his eyes began to close all by themselves before he could get very far. Nithira Devi, Goddess of Sleep, banished straitly thus far, prepared her siege: he simply couldn't seem to escape her intoxicating net. He swayed in his place for a while. Finally, he simply surrendered to his impulses, lay down right beside the forge, and fell fast asleep.

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Many were the terrible nightmares that haunted his troubled slumber—one, even, revolved entirely around the sword: a man entered and asked for it upon which the ironsmith promptly returned the blade. *Your charges?* Demanded the man, to which the ironsmith shook his head. *None*, he answered. *Consider this my offering to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani*.

Careful now, warned the man. *Never mention her name, especially—are you aware of your fate if you do?*

These lips shall never utter it. Why would I, Ayya?

And this young man; what about him? You speak in such loud tones too–

Fast asleep, I tell you—wouldn't hear thunder if it crashed over his ears.

If you suspect him of having learnt anything—throw him into the forge's fire!

At the end of this conversation, Vandhiyathevan dreamt the sword's claimant and the ironsmith dragging him towards the flames. Then the scenario shifted; a different scene unfolded.

Envoys of Yaman escorted him straight to Hell, where Dharma Rajan duly reviewed Vandhiyathevan's life on earth. "A master liar; there's simply no end to the falsehoods this one has uttered," intoned Chithraguptan, glancing disinterestedly at the *olai* in his hand.

"No, please—each was in the service of the Chakravarthy's illustrious family!" Vandhiyathevan shrieked. "I may have said a few to carry out my missions, you understand—"

"A lie is a lie, no matter what the reason," Yaman cut in, like a blade. "Push him into our massive hellfire!" The terrifyingly loud chorus of a hundred thousand disembodied voices rose from within the sickening confines.

The envoys appeared again, hauling him this time to a blazing, terrifying inferno and prepared to throw him in. To Vandhiyathevan's fanciful eyes, they seemed to sport the visages of the Pazhuvettarayar brothers. Even as he regarded them, startled, Kundhavai arrived. "This man lied merely to carry out my orders," she proclaimed. "Throw *me* into the fire!"

Miraculously, Nandhini Devi made a remarkable appearance as well. "Push them *both* in!" announced that good lady in high humour; the envoys, eager to obey her, clutched the prisoners. "*Ayyo*, no," shrieked Vandhiyathevan, struggling desperately to free himself—and sat up the next instant, suddenly and fully awake. Just a nightmare … and the realization soothed him somewhat. For all that, his body shook with subtle tremors as though those horrendous visions had been real.

Chee! Never, ever shall I lie about anything again, he swore to himself, and turned to the ironsmith. "Have I been asleep for long?"

"Not really, *Appane*—just the space of two whole *jaamams*. Good God, a direct descendent of Kumbakarnan at the very least—if you could sleep like this in broad daylight, I wonder how you do at night?"

“Heavens—that long? In that case … are the horseshoes ready?”

“I’m yet to begin, but I confess I don’t see the point. What would a sleepyhead like you do with a horse? You’d promptly lose it—you’d lose your own precious self!”

Vandhiyathevan jumped, startled. A curious suspicion niggled in the back of his mind; he ran to the entrance and peered out—to realize that his tethered stallion was missing. “*Ayyo*!” he yelled, hand creeping towards the sword at his waist instantly. “Where’s the horse?”

“Calm down; your precious steed is safe. Look in the backyard.”

Vallavarayan made his way to the *kollai* where stood his steed, fenced on three sides by a thatched shed; the boy who had industriously blown a pipe in the forge was now stuffing the beast with grass. At the sight of him, the horse quivered and neighed in welcome.

“Do hold him, *Ayya*,” requested the boy. “I must measure the hooves.”

Vandhiyathevan duly did so, caressing the animal, as the youngster went about his task.

“Who tethered my horse here?” The warrior asked, finally.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Appa told me to.”

“And why was that?”

“Periya Pazhuvettarayar and his men passed by this village some time ago. They’d have taken this horse if he’d been at the front door.”

An old memory surfaced in Vandhiyathevan’s mind—of Thirunarayanapuram—and he blushed for a moment, ashamed of such an obvious misstep. Guilt was accompanied by a spark of gratitude towards the ironsmith and his son for their caution.

Measurements taken, the duo returned to the forge. The smith took up a piece of iron, bent it in the shape of a horseshoe and began to work on it.

“I must thank you for protecting my horse,” Vandhiyathevan began.

“I consider it my duty to safeguard the belongings of my customers.”

“How long has it been since Pazhuvettarayar’s entourage passed?”

“More than two *naazhigais*—and I was astonished that you managed to sleep through that pandemonium, I must say.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t see why you should’ve wasted all this time. Surely work could have begun the moment they’d gone?”

“*Begun*, you say? How, considering the news they brought? Who on earth could? I’m obliging you, *Thambi*, for the sake of my word … where are you from?”

Wondering about the cataclysmic news that might have suspended work and ruined moods, Vandhiyathevan answered. “Ilankai.”

The ironsmith paused and let his eyes trail up and down Vallavarayan’s face. “And … did you manage to see Prince Arulmozhi Varmar?”

Vandhiyathevan, who had sworn just a while ago to speak the truth and nothing but the truth, nodded. “Certainly.”

“Indeed. And when did you see him last?”

“This morning.”

The ironsmith straightened, treating Vandhiyathevan to an outraged stare. “What’re you playing at, *Thambi*?”

“Nothing at all, *Ayya*. Merely speaking the truth.”

“You sound like you could even tell me where he is this very moment!”

“If I’m asked—why, yes.”

“Go ahead, then.”

“Choodamani Viharam in Naagai.”

“I’ve seen a good many liars in my time, *Thambi*,” the other shook his head. “But never one with such a fertile imagination.”

Vandhiyathevan felt his lips try to quirk into a smile, and laughed to himself. How ready people were to place faith in outrageous falsehoods—and yet, how loathe to believe the complete and utter truth! *The merit of my particular stars*, he mused. *Or the effect of my peculiar horoscope?*

“When did you leave Ilankai, my boy?”

“Four days ago.”

“Ah, that explains your ignorance.”

“Of what exactly, *Ayya*?”

“News that the sea has claimed Ponniyin Selvar!”

It took a good deal of effort, but Vandhiyathevan managed a very creditable performance of stunned shock. “*Ayyayo*! But—who told you so?”

“There was talk to that effect in these parts, yesterday. The village heads halted Pazhuvettarayar’s entourage and questioned the man; he confirmed it. Ah, that lightning didn’t blast that wretched sinner where he stood!”

“Why abuse that old man?”

“On his head lies this disaster, for he must have lured the prince onto his ship and drowned him at sea—or at least, that’s the general impression. The festivities and welcome party planned for him were cancelled for that very reason.”

“Do these people love the prince so well, then?”

“Don’t they? Oh, the village has collapsed into tearful lamentations—and not just them; the whole of Chozha Nadu will soon find itself drowning in a sea of sorrow. The Pazhuvettarayars are about to be cursed out of existence. The Chakravarthy is already in his sickbed—I daren’t imagine the effect of this news on him. One wonders what other horrors are in store for us. There’s been the *dhoomakethu* in the sky too, for some time—something had to happen, didn’t it?”

Indeed, marveled Vandhiyathevan, revolving in his mind every catastrophic scenario that could possibly occur. *A stroke of luck that this man didn’t believe me; I might not want to lie, but there’s no need to blurt the truth about the prince either*, he decided. Princess Kundhavai doubtless had an important reason to wish her brother in Choodamani Viharam. *I must consult her before I decide upon further action*.

“Such deep thoughts, *Thambi*,” remarked the ironsmith.

“It’s just that … I too, was caught in the whirlwinds,” Vandhiyathevan offered. “Miraculously, I was saved—and I was thanking God for His gracious favour.”

“Is there such a thing as His grace?”

“What’s this you say, *Ayya*?”

“Would the Pazhuvettarayars be able to establish such a despotic rule if so? Would Ponniyin Selvar have been lost at sea?”

“Careful, now. Those lords are in power these days—your rash words might well be overheard and then what will you do?”

“A concern that ought to be *yours*, by rights. I speak while I’m awake but you—you blubber in your sleep!”

“*Ayyayo*—what did I say?”

“Called the Pazhuvettarayars the envoys of Yaman, for one thing, and the Ilaiya Rani a female fiend—not that you were far wrong, in my opinion, but what of your fate if these careless words fell on wrong ears? And all these ramblings during the exact moment the Pazhuvettarayars were passing by, too—I was petrified, I tell you.”

“What did you do?”

“Went to the entrance and slammed shut the door to the forge. Your horse had been taken to the *kollai* well before, of course.”

“And … did I say anything else in my sleep?”

“Ha, no shortage of nonsense at all, *Thambi*.”

“Good God! Er—what sort of nonsense?”

“You persuaded the prince to travel to Pazhaiyarai, but he insisted on being imprisoned by the Pazhuvettarayars …there was so much more, boy. Even something about Ilaiya Piratti and, well—careful, *Thambi*; that’s all I can say. Careful!”

Vandhiyathevan hung his head, overcome with shame, hoping against hope that he hadn’t blurted anything untoward about Kundhavai Devi. The very thought was terrifying. He ought to sleep in a room all alone with a latched door, henceforth. Or a desert devoid of humans; even a forest or a mountain cave?

“How did you manage to get caught in the whirlwind? And escape?”

“The ship I’d boarded was struck by lightning, and sank; I clutched a plank and managed to float for ages. I was lucky, though—a boat-girl caught sight of me; I reached shore.”

“The prince could’ve been as fortunate, couldn’t he?”

“God’s grace might have certainly allowed for such a possibility.”

“Where did you stay, last night?”

“Kodikkarai, naturally. Pazhuvettarayar’s men were milling about on shore all day; I had to seek shelter and some sleep at the Kuzhagar temple. I started before daybreak.”

“That explains your ignorance about the prince’s fate.”

“I must thank you for making it known to me. And now, *Ayya*, I ought to be on my way to Pazhaiyarai—and without getting into the Pazhuvettarayars’ clutches, to boot. Which road must I take?”

“The lord and his entourage will be on the Thanjavur *rajapattai*, so you could travel along the Mullai River.”

“I would, if only you’d shoe my horse quickly.”

“Done,” promised the smith, beginning to batter the iron, freshly bent from the forge’s blazing fire. “This one’s for Periya Pazhuvettarayar!” He chanted for each blow. “And this, on the Younger! The third’s for Sambuvaraiyar; may the fourth fall on Mazhavaraiyar!”The blows rained vigorously, revealing the depth of the anger burning in the hearts of Chozha subjects towards these chieftains and lords.

The horseshoes forged, finally, Vandhiyathevan attempted to pay the ironsmith—but was rebuffed.

“I undertook this task not for money, lad, but rather, your sake.”

The young man gave thanks heartily once again, and took his leave.

“*Thambi*,” called out the ironsmith, as he was about to gallop away. “Why the journey to Pazhaiyarai?”

“If you will refrain from asking, *Ayya*,” Vandhiyathevan grinned, reining his horse. “I shan’t have to lie about it.”

“Much better, *Appane*,” chuckled the ironsmith. “Keep your wits in sleep, too!” And sent him on his way.

***

The sun was sinking when Vandhiyathevan resumed his journey. Twilight had closed in by the time he touched the banks of the Mullai; darkness was seeping into the sky. He was comforted though, for all he’d have to do now was follow the river; there would be no need to even ask directions.

Night had barely fallen and yet, the skies glowed with a hundred thousand sparkling, dazzling star-lamps. The banks of the Mullai sported small, scraggy bushes rather than towering trees; the night's faint illumination was more than enough to pick his way through.

Thousands of fireflies fluttered in play around the bushes, as though competing with the very stars, flickering little fairy lights in the darkness.

Vandhiyathevan felt his heart brim with enthusiasm—not that there wasn't reason enough: the entire country might worry itself into shreds about the prince but he was in a position to know that Arulmozhi Varmar was safe and sound. He had a better idea, now, of the extraordinary love Chozha people cherished for their beloved prince, too. And then, there was the fact that he'd managed to outwit Ravidasan a second time … but best of all—and the thought that sent a frission of dizzying delight through his body—was that he'd soon be meeting Kundhavai Devi again.

And not just as a matter of course either; no, for hadn't he successfully completed her mission! A good many moments were spent in glorious contemplation of the endless obstacles he had met as a result of said mission, and his success in identifying and finally overcoming them. The thought was gratifying, and filled him with justifiable pride. There was no doubt that this time tomorrow, he would be in Ilaiya Piratti's exalted presence—aha! His skin tingled in anticipation at the very thought.

The velvety night sky sprinkled with diamonds; fireflies dancing about the bushes on earth; the gently murmuring Mullai by the side; a soothing breeze, cool and pleasant—all sent Vandhiyathevan into a nameless ecstasy. Earth and sky seemed bathed in glorious, incandescent joy that seemed somehow, beyond words. An old song of love floated hazily into his mind—and this certainly seemed the right place to sing heartily. Well, why shouldn't he? No human soul could be found in the vicinity; even birds had retired to their nests. There could be no objection to giving his voice full rein, and letting it range across his considerable vocal spectrum.

This, he did. Here is the song—and need we mention she of whom he sang?

“Vaana chudarkal ellaam

Maane undhanai kandu

meni silirkuthadi—ange

meimaranthu nirkuthadi!

Theno undhan kuraldhaan

thendralo un vaimozhikal

meenotha vizhimalarkal—kandaal

veri mayakkam tharuvatheno?”

No sooner had Vandhiyathevan finished singing about her honeyed voice, pleasing words, exquisite eyes, and the way even stars seemed stunned at her beauty—than jackals began to howl in the distance.

The next instant came an amused, human chuckle.

Vandhiyathevan jerked around, dismayed and rather nervous. His hand crept almost despite himself to the sword at his waist.

A figure detached itself from the gloomy shadows enveloping a *Punnai* tree.

“A wonderful song, *Thambi*,” it praised. “As for the jackals’ competing chorus—infinitely better!”

And the Devaralan broke into delighted cackles.

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13

Poisonous Barbs

The Devaralan here, at this moment! Vandhiyathevan's heart could not but shrink a little as his mind automatically conjured images of the man's terrifying predictions during his frenzied performance in the Kadambur Palace—not to mention the news imparted by him and Ravidasan mid-sea, as the whirlwind raged around them. Difficult indeed, to determine the veracity or otherwise of their fantastic statements—but that they were engaged in some mysterious, nefarious conspiracy was certain. Vandhiyathevan lamented the terrible twist of fate that had thrown him with one of the members of this wretched group in a lonely place devoid of human habitation; the wild thought of simply slapping his horse into a gallop and getting away was irresistible. He glanced around with this intention; in the distance leapt flames. A cremation ground, where a body doubtless burned this very moment. A body that had once brimmed with life, buffeted by the winds of desire and desperation—that had once known every shade of happiness and sorrow … that would be reduced to a handful of ashes in the space of half a *naazhigai*! The fate of every soul in this world, in the end; king of kings or a beggar seeking alms—they were bound for the earth, one day.

Vandhiyathevan's terror vanished as quickly as it had appeared. *There's no reason to run from this petty, hypocritical fraud*, he mused. *Clearly, he's here to say something; why not listen? Could he possibly be the man who vanished out the back door of the forge when I entered? Perhaps that unique specimen of a sword was his—it possessed the emblem of a fish at its base, after all. A chat might not be amiss at this point*, he decided. *I might even learn something new*.

Accordingly, he nudged his horse into a slow walk; the animal seemed grateful, seemingly finding its new shoes a difficult accessory and Vandhiyathevan felt rather a brute for spurring it on, anyway. "How on earth did you end up here, my fellow?" He asked in his most offhand fashion.

“That question ought to be *mine*, by rights,” shot back the Devaralan. “We left you mid-sea, tied to the mast of a sinking ship—but here you are. How did you manage to escape?”

“You’re not the only one with magic at your fingertips, you know.”

“Your belief in spells gladdens my heart, truly. I managed to learn of your solitary journey too, with my extraordinary powers—which explains my presence here, anticipating you.”

“Were you? Why? What do you want of me?”

“Think, dear fellow. Or use your fabulous magical skills, why don’t you?”

“I’ve no idea how much of what you spouted on that ship was true, and how much just a product of your marvelous imagination—but I’ve decided to forget it all. No one shall know …”

“Magnanimous—not that I’m not bothered, to tell the truth. The moment you consider sharing details, your tongue will be chopped off. You’ll be dumb for the rest of your life.”

Vandhiyathevan shivered, memories rising, unbidden, of the mute women he had encountered in Thanjai and Ilankai. He proceeded silently for a while, wondering why the ruffian followed. *Good God, how am I to escape him? A swampy bog like the ones littering Kodikkarai might come in handy now—could I push him into the river, perhaps? Pointless; too little water*. Well, if all else failed, he could always turn to a faithful ally: his trusty sword.

“I can read your mind, *Thambi*—kindly don’t indulge in wild flights of fantasy, for they won’t work.”

A change of topic was indicated; Vandhiyathevan needed time to work out an exit strategy as well, and conversation might prove a good stalling technique. “Where’s your partner Ravidasan?”

“*You* ought to know,” the Devaralan dissolved into ghoulish laughter. “Where’s he?”

This was the wrong tactic, Vandhiyathevan realized, startled. *I shouldn't have brought up the mandhiravadhi*. There was every possibility of the other having met and spoken to him. *This could be a ruse to plumb my knowledge* …

"So silent, *Thambi*. Won't you reveal Ravidasan's whereabouts? Ah, well—tell me about Poonguzhali, then. Where's that boat-girl?"

Vandhiyathevan jumped as though he'd stepped on a snake, palpably nervous. He hesitated, his tongue refusing to even form words.

"Nothing about her either, eh? I'll leave that be—you must have your reasons for shielding her, I think. You sang a lovely romantic song just now, didn't you? Was she the reason?"

Vallavarayan almost fell over himself, refuting this. "No, no—I swear she wasn't!"

"You're jittery, aren't you? Why so nervous?"

"That's enough; I've no time for inane chatter," Vandhiyathevan snapped. "And why're you holding the reins? I'm leaving—there're a great many important things to do."

"You don't know the purpose of my visit yet."

"Not unless you tell me, I won't."

"The banks of River Mullai have an extraordinary power, you know. They can grant the heart's deepest desire."

"Well, I desire nothing."

"Liar. She of whom you sang your pretty song is keen on a meeting. If you so wish—"

"When?"

"This very night."

"What sort of nonsense is this?"

“None at all, *Thambi*. Over there!” pointed the Devaralan.

A vague outline of something was visible further along, on their path. Vandhiyathevan peered through the gloom, and realized that it was a palanquin—a closed one, to boot.

Aha—now, where had he seen such a specimen? Wait, didn’t this belong to the Young Queen of Pazhuvoor? Was Nandhini within, this very moment? He could barely restrain his eagerness to know and rode right up to it.

At this distance, the palm tree emblem was clearly visible—and the palanquin’s screen seemed to rustle a little.

Vandhiyathevan jumped down from his horse at once. A strange sound emanated from the Devaralan’s throat the same instant.

Seven or eight men erupted from behind the surrounding bushes and sprang upon Vandhiyathevan, clutching him so tightly that he couldn’t move a muscle. Next, they tied his arms and legs securely; one blindfolded him as well. Another yanked away his sword. The young man was then bundled unceremoniously inside the palanquin which was raised at once; the men shouldered the bars and hastened on a path, while several others quickly arranged themselves in formation, back and front. The Devaralan performed the office of a guide while one of the men led Vandhiyathevan’s hapless horse.

Everything had happened in moments; *within the blink of an eye* would be an understatement. Vandhiyathevan, who hadn’t expected an attack of this kind at all, had been stunned into submission. Every faculty was suspended when he was thrown into the palanquin; he had no idea what had just occurred, or was happening even when it began to pick up pace.

His muddled brain cleared a little, though, with movement. The blindfold slipped off within moments and he twitched aside the screen with bound hands. The palanquin had veered away from the riverbanks and was now hurrying inland, he realized.

It would be no herculean task to wriggle out of the ropes; neither would throwing himself out of the moving palanquin. His horse was right behind, after all; overpowering seven or eight men, jumping onto his steed and making an escape should not take more than minutes. He considered, briefly, the feasibility of this plan—but something stopped him.

A peculiar scent enveloped the interior of the palanquin; one that jolted him with enthusiasm at first. His mind rebelled against rejecting its fascinating appeal; its electrifying presence. Where was the palanquin being taken, besides? *Nandhini*, whispered his mind, providing a score of logical reasons for this conclusion. Unbidden rose desire in his heart of hearts—*I should like to see her again*, he thought, mild eagerness flaring by leaps and bounds into a roaring, unchecked inferno of anticipation. His brain put forth a thousand objections, rational reasons for why such a meeting would prove fatal; desire, an ancient, primal impulse overruled every one of them. What could she do, after all? Why mustn't he discover the reason for her summons? And if he could contrive to unearth something—well, so much the better; he was a master strategist after all, and could spin ruses to defeat her cunning wiles. There was no saying when he might see her next; no guarantee that he would even see her at all. Further journeys to Thanjavur were an impossibility; even dangerous. No, far better to meet her thus, on the way—why not just see her, one more time …?

Indeed—he did have another pressing reason to meet Nandhini: the mute lady he had run into in Ilankai, *Oomai Arasi*—had he been right in detecting a likeness between her and the Pazhuvoor Queen? Oughtn't he to solve *this* mystery, at the very least?

He was still revolving these schemes in his mind, when he began to feel distinctly muzzy. His head spun; sleep seemed to press upon his eyelids—wait—no! This wasn't its pleasant call; he'd snored almost the whole day, after all. Something else—a faintness—the scent within the palanquin was making his senses swim—*ayyo*! What peril was this—he'd have to get away—*jump*!

But he could not. Every attempt to untie his hands was futile; they would not even move. He tried to sit up but flopped back; tried to kick his

legs, to no avail. And that was it. His eyes closed by themselves; his faculties failed. Finally, unconsciousness claimed him.

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Vandhiyathevan's first instinct when he regained his senses was to jump out of the palanquin—but lo and behold! He found himself, instead, in a spacious room well-lit by glittering lamps. As in the palanquin, an unknown fragrance pervaded these chambers but there the similarity ended: this one did not muddle his faculties; in fact, quite the opposite. It appeared to be *akhil*, and cleared his head in short order. He sat up in the seat he had been lying full-length, and peered around. The door was wide open; he gazed at it with considerable eagerness.

Nandhini made an entrance.

He stared at her unblinking—and if her indescribable, radiant beauty, her *soundharyam* was certainly reason enough for his stunned astonishment, it wasn't the only one; the bizarre circumstances of such an unexpected meeting was another. And then, there was her perplexing resemblance to the old woman in Ilankai; how alike they were! Was it truly just a remarkable similarity of features—or was it the *Oomai Rani* herself, resplendent in exotic silks and expensive jewellery?

"*Ayya*," began Nandhini, her clear tone melodious, and with just a touch of sweet, heavenly temple bells. "What an excellent person you are!"

"I thank you," nodded Vandhiyathevan.

"The mark of a good man is to vanish without so much as a by-your-leave—and you left the Thanjai Palace without a word to me, didn't you?" she demanded.

He chuckled.

"I helped you enter Thanjai fort; I slipped to you my own signet ring, etched with a palm tree, off my finger," she argued. "Shouldn't you have returned it to me at the very least?"

He hung his head now, ashamed.

“Surely you can restore my property now—its purpose has been served, I imagine,” Nandhini stretched out a hand delicate and beautiful as a flower. “You don’t intend to visit Thanjai again, I presume.”

“The ring, I’m sorry to say, *Devi*, was confiscated by Boodhi Vikrama Kesari, the Ilankai Commander,” Vandhiyathevan admitted, rather chagrinned. “Pray accept my apologies.”

“Wonderful! My possession is now in the hands of my *janma sathru*, my mortal enemy. Words fail me at your remarkable gratitude.”

“Hardly my fault. I didn’t give it to them; they simply took it.”

“And you, warrior of warriors, noble scion of the royal Vaanaathi Raayars, were coerced into watching? I can scarce believe it!”

“I might add, *Ammani*, that my very presence here is the result of, er—coercion. Didn’t your men—”

“The truth, now *Ayya*—and I must ask you to carefully remember every moment of the last hour—was your hand truly forced?” Nandhini trained her exquisite eyes upon him, each word finding its mark like a well-aimed dart. “Wasn’t there the slightest hint of freewill? Had you no opportunity—not a single one—to jump out of the palanquin?”

Vandhiyathevan had the grace to blush. “I came of my own accord, yes.”

“Why?”

“You did summon me, after all—”

“To reclaim my signet ring!”

“Was that all?”

“There *was* another reason: the vault under my husband’s protection—you were there that night, weren’t you?”

Vandhiyathevan looked at her, startled.

“Truly? You really thought I didn’t know? Of all the nonsensical—! You couldn’t have made it out without my knowledge!”

“*Devi* …”

“I knew, and so did Periya Pazhuvettarayar. He commanded the guard to stab you then and there; I countermanded his order the instant his back was turned. You escaped with your life; your precious friend though, fell in grave peril—or yours would have been the skeleton providing company to the piles of pearls in the dungeon!”

Vandhiyathevan was drowning in a sea of amazement. He couldn’t bring himself to believe her—but how else could she know of his presence in the vault? Courtesy demanded at least a modicum of gratitude, however. “*Ammani* …” he began.

“Don’t. Don’t say what your heart doesn’t feel.”

“But *Devi* …”

“It wasn’t in the expectation of thanks that I mentioned saving your life—rather, I wished to deliver a word of caution: pray do not enter that vault again; it’s under very heavy guard.”

“I’ve certainly no such intention.”

“Why indeed? Gratitude is alien to you, after all. But wait—your friend, the one who almost lost his life because of you—was taken in by me; I nursed him to health in my own palace. That pleases you, I hope. Or perhaps betrayal runs in your very blood? Ingratitude must go hand in hand with back-stabbing, I imagine, in your conscience.”

Nandhini’s well-chosen barbs found their target with superb precision; Vandhiyathevan stayed silent, shuddering with excruciating pain as each word slammed into his heart like a poisoned arrow.

“And as for the physician’s son whom you so kindly handed to the authorities in your place … did you care to know his fate?”

“I’d hoped to ask you.”

“I’ve no objection to telling you—if you’ll share something with me, first: what of Prince Arulmozhi Varmar, who left Ilankai in your company?”

Vandhiyathevan almost jumped out of his skin. Was this the motive behind her unique brand of torture—to discover the prince’s whereabouts? *I won’t fall for it*, he determined to himself.

“My Queen—pray do not ask this of me.”

“Ah, yes; anything but this, for you won’t answer in any case, I know. And your beloved, how does she fare? Surely you can tell me *that*.”

“Whom do you speak of?” Vandhiyathevan’s eyes spit sparks of outrage. “Careful!”

“Oh, I am—you didn’t think I referred to that exalted empress in Pazhaiyarai, did you? Good grief; she wouldn’t even deign to look in your direction; you’re as dust under her feet. No, I ask of the boat-girl who ferried you to and from Ilankai. Poonguzhali *is* your beloved, isn’t she?”

“No, no, I swear! She showed me her lovers at midnight once; fire-demons that rumble and explode above the swampy quagmires of Kodikkarai—!”

“Fortunate girl! They’re the very image of light; they rise in front of her, bright and glowing—but mine are doomed beings that prowl only in the shadows. Have you ever lain in the gloom of a ruined *mandapam* at midnight, *Ayya*? Glimpsed formless, nameless silhouettes flitting about—owls and bats flapping in the depths of darkness? My heart harbours such creatures too … haunted spirits that flutter endlessly through murky, shadowy chambers—they beat against my heart; scratch my cheeks with their wings! Where do they come from, these terrifying, indistinct beings? Where do they go? Why do they circle me so hungrily … do *you* know, *Ayya*?” And Nandhini stared around the room, eyes filled with madness.

Vandhiyathevan felt his strong heart convulse as he gazed at her. Compassion flooded him—but through it, unbeknownst, snaked a vague nameless fear. Finally, he found his voice. “*Devi*, please,” he embarked on an attempt to soothe her. “Calm yourself—peace—”

“Peace!” Nandhini turned to him wildly. “Who’re you to tell me what I must feel?”

“A poor young man of the Vaanar clan. And you, *Devi*?”

“I? You ask me that? I don’t know—and I’m trying to find out. Who am I? A woman? Or do you wish to know if I’m a ghoul or ghost? A demon, perhaps?”

“Perish the thought! A celestial maiden, clearly, fallen from the heavens, aren’t you? A curse—”

“A curse, yes—I carry the weight of some sort of divine blight … but I don’t know what it might be. I’m so ignorant, you see: who am I? What’s the purpose of my birth? I know none of these things but God, in his mercy, has granted me just one heavenly sign—look!” And she raised the sword by her side. Recently worked upon, the steel glittered in the lamplight, almost dazzling in its intensity.

Vandhiyathevan recognized it at first sight; the weapon from the forge. Writhing under the onslaught of Nandhini’s poisonous words until this moment, his heart steadied in the presence of a tangible steel weapon, this *vaalaayudham*. He was used, after all, to spears and swords; blades he could touch and feel; instruments of war, familiar from his very birth. No reason to be afraid of them, then—should Nandhini even be insane enough to use one on him.

“I do see it, *Devi*,” he answered with a creditable assumption of serenity. “A wondrous sword; a sword of unique workmanship; royal too, I should think. A blade meant for a warrior among warriors—and yet it lies, innocent, upon hands delicate as a blossom. How?” He worded his question carefully. “And what sort of divine portent does it indicate?”

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14

A Flying Horse

Nandhini raised the dazzling sword and embraced it lovingly; she nuzzled its smooth surface against her cheeks; brought it to her coral-red, luscious lips and bestowed a tender kiss. To Vandhiyathevan's fanciful eyes, it was as though a radiant red lotus touched a blazing ball of fire—but the next instant a blood-soaked, roiling cloud appeared to intercept the gloriously lustrous *poorna chandran* for Nandhini's face suddenly assumed the fatal, terrifying beauty of Goddess Kali, beloved of Kaapaalikars and craver of blood sacrifices. Once she had returned the weapon to its place by her side, however, her face shone with its usual serene, exquisite loveliness.

"Indeed—this sword is a divine sign, but I haven't been able to divine its significance. I send it to the forge often, you know, to keep it in good repair, remove rust and maintain its edge. As a tigress would care for her cub, you understand. This little one oughtn't to be gored by the cruel horns of wild bison, after all, before it's of age. I nurture my sword as the Arabs do their beloved stallions; the way Queen Vaanamaa Devi nurses her sick husband, Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy, sacrificing her everything. But alas!—the good God above hasn't seen fit to bless me with a glimmering of purpose. Does He wish these delicate hands that once strung flower garlands, to stab some evil, venomous heart? Or is it His gracious will that I plunge this blade into myself and die a brutal death as my blood bubbles and stains my jewels and silks in a terrifying, gory spectacle? I don't know. I can only hope that the divine entity that saw fit to give me this sword will provide a sign at the appointed time—but as I'm unaware of that auspicious moment, I keep myself in a state of readiness day and night. Oh yes—the entire *samrajyam* is aware of my predilection for finery; my fascination for ornaments and the most beautiful garments—and that I'm garbed in the most exquisite attire each day and every day, all sixty *naazhigais*. That poor man, Periya Pazhuvettarayar convinces himself that my embellishments are on his account; that I keep myself arrayed thus in deference to his status; my

jewelled and coiffed form is to gladden his heart, he assures himself, and is in a permanent state of pleased delight. Ah, little does he realize the blaze that consumes me!”

Vallavarayan, who had been listening to this wild effusion, tongue-tied and rather dazed, gathered his wits somewhat. “Er … where’s Periya Pazhuvettarayar, *Ammani*?”

“Why? You’re not afraid of that doddering old man, are you?” She smirked.

“If I’m not afraid of *you*, *Ammani*, why would I fear *him*?” Vandhiyathevan countered.

“Ah!—this, *Ayya*, is why I like you. Everyone fears me for some reason, you see. That warrior among warriors, Periya Pazhuvettarayar, veteran of countless battlefields and bearer of sixty-four glorious scars on his body, is afraid. His brother Chinna Pazhuvettarayar—ha, Kalanthaka Kandan with the might to defeat Death!—trembles in my presence; Madhuranthaka Thevar, consumed with the desire to rule this empire as *eka chakradhipathi*, assumes a most devout mien when meeting me while Sundara Chozhar, with an invitation to cross the threshold of Yaman’s abode any moment, quakes at my appearance—faints each time he sets eyes on me! And then, Parthibendra Pallavan—ah, many were the stories I’d heard of his phenomenal courage and fantastic deeds; of his famed friendship with Aditha Karikalar—and yet, witness his feeble demeanour a bare half a *naazhigai* in my presence! He now dogs my footsteps, having forgotten all thought of duty and rejoining his friend; he slavers at the mouth, panting with eagerness to obey my commands—he’d receive anything at my foot, upon his head … but even he—he’s terrified of me! And do you know, I find myself revisiting an old memory: I was fascinated by fire, as a child. I would inch as close to it as I could and stretch a finger to touch the flames—but snatch it back at the last instant, terrified. I’ve lost count of the times I did this. Parthibendran’s behaviour—when he tries to approach me and then backs off, scared witless—reminds me of my own experience with fire, but why despise just Pallavan? The man to whom you were envoy; the one who entrusted you with an *olai* in Kanchi—Aditha Karikalar … was no different. He cherished boundless affection for me when we were children—but deep down was an undercurrent of nameless dread. Dread

—and oh, the twists and turns in my life! Will you convey a message when you next meet him, *Ayya*? Inform him that I've decided to let bygones be bygones; I stand now in the position of the Pazhuvoor Queen; his grandmother, to tell the truth. He needn't entertain the slightest fear about setting eyes on me; I wouldn't bite. Will you tell him this, from me?"

"There's no guarantee that I shall live long enough to meet him, *Devi* and if I do, there's much that I ought to make known to him. I most humbly apologize—but I make no promises."

"I was right," Nandhini said, slowly. "You are, indeed, the bravest among the men I've met for you speak without a thought of prevarication. I'm not surprised I like you. I do not meet many, warrior of the Vaanar clan; neither do I climb into a chariot and dash where I please, like a certain Pazhaiyarai princess. Should I find myself forced to travel, I seek a closed palanquin; I meet only those with whom I have business—and they're mostly cowards without the courage to speak their minds. But you—you reveal your thoughts without the slightest intent to deceive …"

"I've realized that there's no point in deception, Rani. No man's heart can barricade itself against your eyes' piercing lances; no secrets guarded against your glances—"

"That may be—but I find my weapons powerless against your heart, *Ayya*, for I can see nothing. Be that as it may, you enquired about Pazhuvettarayar, didn't you? My husband and Parthibendran have journeyed to the nearest village which hosts *Kannaki Koothu* and *Velanaattam* tonight, I hear; it is hoped that the *veriyattakkaran*, the principal performer, might throw some light on the young prince's fate with his predictive powers. Fools, the pair of them! They let slip the one person with credible information and go haring after fortune-tellers and astrologers! It will be hours before they return, which is why I made arrangements to bring you here. I must ask you once more, *Ayya*: you know the prince's fate, don't you? But you will not share it with me, will you?"

"No, *Devi*; I'm afraid I won't. I made a resolution this very day that not a lie would I utter but only the truth, come what may … which is why I cannot reveal anything about the prince. In fact, I rather erred in my

resolve just now; forgive me." He unrolled his waistband and took out the signet ring etched with a palm-tree. "Here's your property, *Ammani*. While it's true that Boodhi Vikrama Kesari's men confiscated it, the Senathipathi did return it. And I, hereby, restore what's yours by right. Pray accept it, *Devi*, and may my trespasses be forgiven." He handed it to her.

Nandhini inspected it keenly and finally withdrew, satisfied that it was indeed her own. "I'm not in the habit of receiving gifts once given, *Ayya*; my intention was merely to test your integrity. Needless to say, you've passed and saved the necessity of asking my men to frisk your person," She shrugged. "This ring may remain with you, in my memory."

"You'd do well to think twice about your magnanimous gesture, *Ammani*; circumstances may arise when I may be forced to use it again …"

"I care not; you may do so with my goodwill. I shall have you blindfolded again and carried in the palanquin; my men will leave you where they found you …"

"Should I refuse?"

"You cannot find your way out of this ruined palace and crumbling fort. You'd be walking in circles, returning to where you started—"

"And this palace, *Devi*? This destroyed fort?"

"Indeed; Chozha Nadu was under the Pallavas once—for a considerable period of time, in fact. These were built by the latter at the zenith of their rule. Later, Chozhas knuckled under other monarchs; this palace found itself under Pandiya control for a while—until the reign of Vijayalaya Chozha, when there was a great battle in this region. The fort was destroyed; so was half of this palace. We're currently in the part that still stands. Some call this the *Pallavarayan Kottai;* others still, the *Pandiyarayan Kottai*, and there's truth in both. But it's accessible only to those who know it inside out. Well? Shall I ask my men to lead you out? Or would you rather find your own way—"

“Good God, no, *Devi*; the luxury of time isn’t mine. I daren’t waste what little I have, stumbling around in dark palaces; the ones who brought me in may well act my escorts out. But before I do … is there no other reason for my summons here? Nothing else I can do—no other assistance I can offer?”

“Since you ask me so nicely: I wish for a flying horse. You may send me one if you come across such a specimen.”

“Did—did you say—a flying horse?”

“Certainly I did.”

“Perhaps you meant an Arab horse that can gallop like the wind?”

“Not at all—I couldn’t even climb one of those. I speak not of a horse that runs upon land with hooves; rather, one that leaps into the sky and spreads its wings, like a bird. So many tales have I heard of these mysterious creatures inhabiting some corner of the world … that I want such a one.”

“I don’t understand—do you wish to ascend to heaven?”

“Do I really seem like one worthy of such greatness? I possess no virtues that commend me to heaven, *Ayya*; quite the opposite, in fact, for my soul bears the weight of many terrible sins.”

“As to that … are the inhabitants of heaven truly so virtuous? It seems to me that they commit crimes in plenty there and are born here, therefore, to claim redemption. When they’re done, they return to their celestial abode.”

“Well, I don’t wish to. Do you know, there’s an expanse of arid wasteland in Pandiya Nadu, dotted with a cluster of bare boulders without a scrap of vegetation; not even weeds? They contain caves within which Thigambara Jain monks once secreted themselves, lost in penance. Snakes and jackals prowl around these spaces, now. Those caves are far dearer to me than even the fabled Amaravathi, capital of the celestial Devas.”

“Strange tastes, *Ammani*.”

“If I should ever gain a flying horse, I’d go to that desert—and then to the island of Ilankai. Such massive mountains covered with trees that pierce the very sky, and dense forests! Or so I’ve heard. They say that herds of elephants drift about on that isle in such numbers as the buffaloes in Chozha Nadu. I shall see these sights—and then—do you know of mountains, *Ayya*, with summits covered in snow and ice since the beginning of time? I’ve heard such places exist somewhere in the middle of earth, and they glitter and dazzle like silver crests when the sun touches them … I should wish, greatly, to glimpse them atop my flying steed. And still further, I’ve heard tell of vast, unending wastes; deserts far, far larger than those in Pandiya Nadu; to stand upon these endless sands during the day is the same as being consumed by blazing fire! I’d fly there and onwards, to lands so cold that the sea freezes, enabling man and beast to simply walk on water … with a flying horse, I could go anywhere I chose—”

“I’m afraid it isn’t in my power to procure such a steed, *Devi*, but such places as you’ve described can, in fact, be visited easily. A sturdy boat and Ilankai may be reached in half a day. Embark on a ship and—”

“I’m not exactly unaware of the means you specify, *Ayya*—but the sea frightens me; ships terrify me. A boat swaying slightly as it crosses a river would completely overwhelm my faculties. You see, now, why your superior ideas would be absolutely no use to me,” Nandhini rose upon the words. “You have my permission to leave.”

“Is there nothing else you wish to tell me, *Devi*?”

“No—but you, it appears, do.”

“Just a question—all I require is an answer. Weren’t you in Ilankai a few days ago? Didn’t you stand in the gloomy shadows of the streets of Anuradhapuram, all alone?”

“Good God—I, to escape Pazhuvettarayar’s endless surveillance, guards, and venture outside the confines of his palace? But why do you ask?”

“I saw you on that island a few days ago, *Ammani*—or rather, a mysterious figure with a startling resemblance to you. You mentioned a

flying horse now … and I couldn't help but wonder if you did indeed possess such a magical steed; perhaps you'd flown to Ilankai. But you weren't wearing jewellery or silks; you were devoid of ornaments, wore a simple *seelai* with your tresses flowing unbound. It—was it you?"

"No, *Ayya*, not at all. This woman you describe—did she speak?"

"Only through signs. And yet, you consort with magicians; perhaps his spells helped your spirit take form, materializing in Ilankai—"

"And if it weren't my spirit form or my own self …?"

"A mute woman bearing a striking resemblance to you."

Nandhini's beautiful eyes stared into the distance; she heaved a deep sigh. "You offered to assist me in some way just now, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Were those words indeed from the heart?"

"Without a doubt."

"In that case, listen: should you ever see her again, bring her to me, somehow. And if you cannot—take *me* to her, at least!"

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Half a *naazhigai* later, Vandhiyathevan stood, once more, upon the banks of the Mullai River, accompanied by his horse. His escorts had melted into the darkness; the Devaralan had vanished without a trace.

Vallavarayan travelled all night, riding at a gentle pace along the river. High above gleamed the comet, its growth complete in the third *jaamam* and occupying a considerable swathe of sky. Did this magnificent cosmic spectacle, this *dhoomakethu* truly portend earth-shaking calamity as most people feared, he mused, or was it all just nonsensical superstition?

Nandhini could not but intrude at times as well; her words were seared into his memory. The repulsion that had swept over him during

his maiden encounter with her in the Thanjai palace had vanished; now, he could only feel a sort of compassion. Clearly a woman mangled by unknown, soul-scarring terrors, he thought, with some pity. But there was some anger as well—for what did he know, after all, about her past? What were her eventual intentions, and what plots was she conspiring to bring to fruition? Everything about her was a deep, dark mystery. Her luminous, indescribable beauty aside, she seemed to possess a strange power, *Maya* almost, a spell like none other. It would be in his best interests to stay away from her in the future; far better if she had reclaimed the palm-tree signet ring … but she hadn't, had she? Vandhiyathevan briefly considered flinging it into the river, but could not quite bring himself to do it. One never knew; he might need it again during these dangerous times. Why throw away a decided advantage?

Once I've met Ilaiya Piratti in Pazhaiyarai and given her all the information I possess, that wretched ring can be disposed, he resolved. *No more; no more of these missions that are more a nuisance than anything.*

Venus, the Morning Star rose in the eastern sky during night's fourth *jaamam*. Vandhiyathevan, remembering ancient warnings that one ought never to cross *Sukran* or *Velli*, stopped, tethered his horse to a tree, and lay down for some well-deserved sleep.

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15

Kaalaamukars

The morning sun's scorching red rays pressed burning fingers upon Vandhiyathevan's face, banishing sleep effectively—but still he lay, unwilling to get up, and squinted through a barely open eye. Two hermits presenting a truly terrifying appearance were stalking towards him: hair matted atop head; a fearsome *thirisoolam* in one hand and an *agni kundam* in the other could not have proclaimed clearer that they were Kaalaamuka Veera Saivars, members of a most formidable cult. Ah, what a pity, he mused, that Azhwarkkadiyaan wasn't here right now to debate them to death! But it wouldn't do to show himself awake; Vandhiyathevan decided that he would pretend to be fathoms deep in slumber until these horrific hermits had passed him by.

Accordingly, he played his part when he sensed their presence close to him, suppressing the instinct to open his eyes when one of them cleared his throat in marked fashion.

"*Sivoham*!" The Kaalaamukan employed the traditional greeting of such hardened ascetics. "A veritable Kumbakarnan, this boy."

"*Sivoham*!" echoed the other, in turn. "Such a healthy youngster would work wonders for us, wouldn't he?"

"*Sivoham*! You misread this boy's guileless expression; he is of no use to us, I assure you," pronounced the first. "Immense peril approaches him."

Vandhiyathevan felt breath struggle in his lungs as he tried to keep up his charade—but to wake now would reveal his ruse, destroying any hope of eavesdropping on their conversation; after all, there was every chance of their revealing the precise nature of the danger closing in on him … wasn't there?

His hopes crumbled to dust, though, for no ray of enlightenment broke through the darkness of the future.

"*Sivoham*! His destiny, I suppose," grunted one. "Come; we ought to be on our way." The duo walked on.

Vandhiyathevan allowed them time to traverse a considerable distance, before rising. Their words rang in his ears, making his heart skip a beat. *Immense peril approaches him …*

Kaalaamukars were the descendants of yesteryear Kaapaalikars; unlike their forebears, the present generation did not indulge in human sacrifice but this is not to say that they had renounced every tradition—in fact, far from it. Public perception gravitated strongly towards their mysterious, superhuman powers for the Kaalaamukars were said to undertake fearsome penances in cremation grounds, thereby acquiring the divine gift of foresight. No surprise, then, that many naïve souls were prepared to render any and every hospitality to these remarkable beings in a bid to escape their wrath. A considerable number of chieftains and kings had given liberal *nivanthams* in temples for the purpose of feeding Kaalaamukars—barring the Chozhas of course who, so far, had shown no inclination to patronize this frightening sect.

Well, they may rave as they please, thought Vandhiyathevan, who was no stranger to the details mentioned above. *A peril that could surpass whatever's happened to me, so far? Nonsense!*

He might try to quiet his restless mind with these reassurances—but it ought to be admitted that the desire to know his future did keep gnawing at a corner of his heart.

When he finally did rise and peer into the distance, those masters of foresight, the Kaalaamukars were farther apart, walking by an old *mandapam*. A manmade hillock stood by this edifice sporting a cave, its opening a lion's gaping maw, baring sharp teeth. Once the exclusive domain of Thigambara Jains, these grottos had since been co-opted by Kaalaamukars.

Why not approach them and engage in conversation? Vandhiyathevan felt the faint spark of eagerness; to think, with him, was

to act. He left his horse tethered and strode to the *mandapam*, whereupon voices drifted over: the Kaalaamukars were deep in discussion on the other side of the hillock.

“That lad could not have been faking,” said one. “He must have been truly fast asleep.”

“So sure, are you?”

“Never have I heard of a man who would willingly give up the chance to know more once he has heard about being in grave danger.”

“I agree that he seemed a stout, brave lad. Having him on our side would not be a bad idea. What do you say?”

“What I wish to know is—*why*? Why would we need boys like him? Especially as the successor to the Chozha throne is about to embrace the Kaalamukar sect—”

“Of whom do you speak?”

“Who else but Madhuranthaka Thevan? Of all the ignorant—”

“But what about the other two?”

“One, as you know, seems to have drowned in the sea. And the other, well—his time in this world shrinks with each day …”

He couldn’t listen to another word of their conversation, Vandhiyathevan decided. Neither did he want to initiate one.

No, his first priority was to get to Pazhaiyarai as quickly as he could; give the princess his news and then, speed his way to Kanchi. He may be in Chozha service but he owed his allegiance, most of all, to Aditha Karikalar, didn’t he? There was no doubt that mortal peril surrounded him; hadn’t even Parthibendra Pallavan fallen prey to the alluring net of the Ilaiya Rani’s mesmerizing beauty? Not to mention that Vandhiyathevan’s master was impetuous by nature; prone to the oddest humours and thus a veritable magnet for hazard; there was no saying what mire he might land in, next. Surely Vandhiyathevan’s first duty was

to him? He ought to leave at once; there was no time to be lost; even dawdling about en route was too much of a crime to be contemplated.

Noiselessly, he padded back to his tethered horse, climbed upon it, and urged the animal into a gallop. He glimpsed the Kaalaamukars staring hard at him as he passed the cave; one of their faces seemed to ring a bell in his memory—but he cantered past, unwilling to investigate more, or to allow them a chance of conversation.

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Vandhiyathevan passed a great many villages on his way, and judging by the placidity with which people went about their life, it was obvious that news about the prince's drowning had not reached them yet. This, he couldn't help thinking, was rather to the good, for it would be in everyone's best interests to reach Pazhaiyarai, and deliver the truth to the Ilaiya Piratti; if the reverse were to reach her ears, it would spell catastrophe—but stay, the consequences of such an event would be worse for while Kundhavai Devi might mistrust such information, the Kodumbalur princess's heart might well stop!

Vallavarayan felt such a rush of nervous fear at this that he spurred on his stallion to even greater speed but that poor animal, newly shod, struggled to maintain even its customary trot. In the end, it was late afternoon; only two *jaamams* to sunset, when the large, imposing fortress walls of Pazhaiyarai rose before his exhausted eyes.

There—the Durgai shrine adorning the gates; his mind conceived an hundred schemes to enter only to discard all at lightning speed, for none seemed to hold water. His palm-tree signet ring would be no use here; the sentries would undoubtedly have been warned about the possible entry of a spy with just such an accoutrement; he would be imprisoned on sight, no questions asked, and bundled to Chinna Pazhuvettarayar to boot. And he certainly had no wish to undergo such a fate before he'd met Kundhavai Devi.

Even as he slowed his horse to a trot towards the gates, mulling over options, he caught sight of a group making its way from another direction. In the midst of soldiers sporting javelins, men carrying aloft a great many standards, and horse-mounted cavalrymen rolled a golden

chariot shaped like a large, beautiful lotus. As for its illustrious occupant —ah, Madhuranthaka Thevar, wasn't it? The same prince he'd seen in the Kadambur palace and later, in the Thanjavur treasure vault … and in that instant, a ruse came to him: Vandhiyathevan realized what he must do to enter the fort. Energy suffused him; he felt ready to accomplish anything.

Never have I heard of a man who would willingly give up the chance to know more once he has heard about being in grave danger—the Kaalaamukan's words had left a deep impression on him and reverberated now, in his mind; hadn't he, Vandhiyathevan, given way to the same longing himself? Well, time to put it to the test here.

Vandhiyathevan spurred his fatigued steed straight into the path of the lotus-shaped golden chariot.

Since none of Madhuranthaka Thevar's retinue had even envisaged the possibility of such an interruption, not a finger was raised until the interloper had practically ridden almost under that esteemed prince's royal nose. And then, Vandhiyathevan did something bizarre: he stood up on his horse's back, staring at Madhuranthakar out of wide, astonished eyes. "Oh—danger!" he shrieked and tumbled off his steed the next instant, rolling a few feet, while his horse staggered away, finally halting at a little distance.

All of this had happened within seconds; some members of the prince's escort legion, seeing a stranger gallop into their midst and towards the chariot, made haste to slip their sword out of their scabbard; still others raised a spear and took aim—but paused in some relief as the would-be attacker dropped off his horse.

Loud laughter bubbled from the retinue at this hilarious sight; Madhuranthaka Thevar chuckled as well, for the chariot had rolled to a stop by then. At a sign from the royal, two from the entourage stepped forward to raise Vandhiyathevan who had however, sat up under his own steam. Now he jumped up without assistance, and was directing a keen glance at Madhuranthakar as though he had never fallen, in the first place.

"Bring him over here," commanded the prince.

The soldier-duo grabbed the young man's hands and dragged him to the chariot—through all of which, Vandhiyathevan's eyes never left Madhuranthakar's face for even a moment.

"And who might you be, *Appane*?" demanded the royal.

"I—it is I, most gracious Chakravarthy!" blurted Vandhiyathevan. "Don't you—don't you recognize me?"

"What on earth are you blabbering about? *Adei*," Madhuranthakar turned to his soldiers. "Stand aside, all of you." They obeyed, and he turned to the young man. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Forgive me—I crave pardon, your highness … the error is mine. You haven't –" Vandhiyathevan stuttered and stammered. "You haven't—not yet—not yet …"

"Have you seen me before?"

"Yes—I mean, no …"

"The truth, now: have you, or haven't you ever set eyes on me?"

"I've sworn to speak the truth from yesterday, your highness," Vandhiyathevan explained. "And so, you may well understand my dilemma—"

"Speak the truth from yesterday, do you?" Madhuranthakar could not help a chuckle. "Amusing, indeed!" He paused. "But that doesn't explain your uncertainty."

"As to that, Highness—one can never be sure about anything these days," Vandhiyathevan shook his head, mournful. "One man resembles another … and those in closed palanquins on occasion are found in chariots the next." He darted a look at the prince from underneath his lashes.

"*What* was that you said?" Madhuranthakar's slightly startled voice betrayed his alarm.

"That I couldn't be sure, as one looked so much like another."

“And—who am I supposed to resemble?”

“I’ve seen you—or someone like you—twice, so far, but I wasn’t sure if it was you or the one I saw—which was why I tried, a moment ago, to —”

“Stare at me by standing on your horse?”

“Yes, *Ayya*.”

“And what did you learn?”

“That you could be the person I saw—or not.”

Madhuranthakar’s darkening face and harsh tone revealed the anger that had been steadily building inside him. “You unscrupulous *rogue*. You ought to be …”

“Pray, *pray* do not give way to anger, your highness—I shall reveal where I saw you, or the one who resembles you—and you may come to your own conclusions.”

“Spit it out, quick!”

“A massive fortress. Its large, imposing walls stretch on all four sides. Warriors among warriors are gathered within. It’s midnight. They speak in rapid, angry voices, faces blurred by smoke from large *agal* lamps on the walls. There’s a palanquin by the side. The warriors insult someone who seems to be their chief, pelting him with question after question. He grows furious in turn, rises quickly, approaches the palanquin, and pushes aside its silk screen. A handsome man steps out. The gathered warriors immediately begin a rousing chant: *Live Long! Vaazhga!* and more, *Long live the Crown Prince!* I even seem to remember shouts of *Long Live the Chakravarthy!* and *Ayya*, the man from the palanquin seemed to possess a remarkable resemblance to you …” Vandhiyathevan paused. “Forgive me if I’ve overstepped my bounds your gracious highness, and said something I oughtn’t.”

Beads of perspiration dotted the forehead of Madhuranthaka Thevar, who had listened to this effusion without interruption; the shadow of dread flitted across his pale face.

“You, who speak the truth from yesterday,” he began slowly. “Were you among those warriors?”

“No, *Ayya*. Certainly not.”

“How, then, could you describe the scene as though you were a witness?”

“I’m not sure if what I saw was real, or some sort of elaborate dream. Let me describe another scenario, if I may: A gloomy dungeon steeped in inky darkness. A secret passage—one that winds round and round, up and down by turns. Three men walk along it; the first goes in front, holding aloft a torch while the third performs sentry duty at the back. The second, in the middle is a handsome personage—indeed, of a beauty that would rival Manmadhan, the God of Love. Gold, precious gems, diamonds and other jewels worth a king’s ransom seem to glitter and dazzle when the torch’s light flickers into dark corners of the vault; it’s obvious that this is a secret treasury overflowing with the wealth of the greatest emperors. The pillars sport terrifying sculptures of demons and ghouls. But, your highness, the man in the middle of the trio along that dungeon’s secret passage seemed to resemble you—and now it only remains for you to corroborate the truth or otherwise of what I—”

“Enough!” The word seemed ripped out of Madhuranthakar’s throat. “Stop.”

Vandhiyathevan obligingly preserved his silence.

“Are you a *nimithakkaaran*?”

“No *Ayya*. I do not interpret signs as a profession—but it’s true that I can tell the past and foretell the future.”

Madhuranthakar spent a few moments deep in thought, and finally raised his head. “What was that you shrieked—standing on your horse?”

“Danger, I yelled.”

“For whom?”

“Your gracious self, of course.”

“What sort of danger?”

“Too much surrounds you, your highness—as do great positions, as well. I’d need a good deal of time to describe everything in detail, though. But your soldiers have seized my sword—if you could be kind enough to take me with you …”

“Fair enough. We shall speak at leisure.” He made a sign to the commander of his forces to come forward, pointed to Vandhiyathevan, clearly instructing him to allow the young man into the fort. The commander listened with rather bad grace, for he was not enthusiastic about letting in such a one—but there was no choice, really; he assented and escorted Vandhiyathevan to his place.

The gates of the Pazhaiyarai fort creaked open in a little while.

Madhuranthaka Thevar and his entourage entered the city with due pomp and splendour—and Vandhiyathevan followed in their wake.

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16

Madhuranthaka Thevar

Ah, Madhuranthaka Thevar! We met this important personage much earlier in this tale—at the Kadambur palace, to be precise—and later, during a midnight trek along the secret passage snaking through the treasure vault to Pazhuvettarayar's palace. Alas that we could not introduce this magnificent prince; one destined for future greatness and renown upon the Thanjavur throne under the grandiloquent title of ***Parakesari Uthama Chozhar***—to our esteemed readers in a manner befitting his exalted status! But now, surely, we may remedy this misstep and thus seek atonement.

Before we embark on Madhuranthakar's history however, we ought, in good conscience, to remind our readers of his peerless lineage.

Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy's reign had been preceded by that of Kandaradhithar, his father's elder brother, his *periya thanthai*. In company of his consort, *dharma pathni* Sembian Maadevi—the Mazhavaraiyar princess whose staunch devotion to Siva Peruman matched her husband's in every way—Kandaradhithar dedicated his entire life to sacred renovation of Siva shrines.

He cherished, moreover, another ambition: the collection of various *Thevaram* hymns scattered with little hope of recovery through the whole of Tamilagam—an ambition that was alas, destined to remain just that, in his lifetime. Still, he managed to gather those he could and even composed a few in the same style. One of these on the renowned shrine of Chidambaram can be found even today, in the ***Thiruvisaippaa*** collection. Of the stupendous accomplishment of his father, the illustrious Paranthaka Chakravarthy who sheathed the roof of Thillaiyambalam in gold he sings thus:

"Venkol vendhan thennan

naadum Eezhamum konda thiral

Senkol Chozhan Kozhivendhan

Sembian ponnanindha

Ankol valaiyaar paadi aadum

Mani Thillaiyambalathul

Enkol Eesan emmiraiyai

endru sol eidhuvathe!”

There is mention in this verse of Kandaradhithar’s father claiming Pandiyan and Eezham kingdoms under the Chozha banner. In the last hymn, he also makes sure to add his own name; it was in his reign that Thanjavur occupied pride of place as capital.

“Seeranmalku Thillai

Sembon ambalathaadi thannai

Kaaraar solai Kozhivendhan

Thanjayarkon kalandha

Aaraavin sol Kandaradhithan

ArunTamil maalai vallaar

Peraavulakil perumaiyodum

Perinbam eidhuvare!”

As a man who had seen and mourned, firsthand, the horrors of war; the cataclysmic devastation and tragic human suffering that followed, Kandaradhithar did his best to propagate peace. Dead against conflict, his disinterest in expanding dominions by force was entirely natural. And it was equally natural for the Chozha *samrajyam*’s borders to shrink at a disastrous rate.

Marriage with the Mazhavaraiyar princess having taken place at a late date, their son, Madhuranthakan had been a mere infant during Kandaradhithar's last days. The *rajyam* was in a precarious state, surrounded by enemies roaring in defiance; as if to make matters worse, Kandaradhithar's younger brother Arinjayan was on his deathbed as a result of mortal injuries upon the battlefield. But destiny now played a hand in their favour for Sundara Chozhan, Arinjayan's son, was of age and an accomplished warrior, having proven himself above and beyond expectations by sounding the victory drum in a great many battlefields. It seemed only right for Kandaradhithar to choose his nephew as heir to the throne; thus it was done, and a royal proclamation released to subjects. As a deterrent to succession battles, he further ordained that Sundara Chozhar's descendents would be the only ones with a right to the Chozha inheritance. In addition, he had expressed a heartfelt wish to his wife that Madhuranthakan be raised a pious devotee of Siva Peruman, and that his life be dedicated to God. The above-mentioned were all more or less common knowledge.

Sembian Maadevi duly carried out her husband's wishes; her son grew, imbibing devotion to Siva Peruman from a tender age, and an unswerving detachment towards the hollow pleasures of worldly life. Until he reached the mature age of twenty at least, Madhuranthakan did treat his mother's dictates as the very Vedhas, and live by them. Not the slightest interest did he evince in affairs of state and as for the suspicion that he might be a claimant to the Chozha throne—the possibility did not even occur.

When it finally did, two years ago, the catalyst could be directly attributed to Madhuranthakan's marriage with Chinna Pazhuvettarayar's daughter—and what was a tiny, hesitant spark was soon fanned into flames by the deviously capable Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani; flames that gradually burst into a raging, roaring inferno. We saw, previously, the rumbling discontent among chieftains and *peruntharam* officers of Chozha Nadu, leading to a massive conspiracy to further unanimous support of Madhuranthakan. Eager hearts looked forward to Sundara Chozhar's death, for the prince would then be set upon the throne—but Madhuranthakan, it seemed, could hardly wait even that long. He now began to question the older man's right itself and to assert that he, Kandaradhithar's son, had been the true heir all along; the Chozha throne ought to have come to *him*, in the first place. And now that

Sundara Chozhar was tied to his sickbed, barely able to provide the care that a bustling, thriving empire required, nay thirsted for—why shouldn't he, Madhuranthakan, ascend the throne of Thanjavur and assume the honourable weight of kingship right away?

It now fell to the Pazhuvettarayars' unenviable lot to soothe their frenzied candidate and keep his kingly ambitions in check; ruining their elaborate schemes due to unseemly haste formed no part of their conspiracy. Sundara Chozhar possessed two sons: formidable warriors both, claiming places in the hearts of Chozha citizens due to their unquestioned valour and other, matchless, princely qualities. Not to mention the complete, unqualified support of two illustrious lords such as the Kodumbalur Velaar and Thirukkovilur Malayaman. Besides, more than half the Chozha army had pledged unquestioning loyalty to Sundara Chozhar's offspring—the fact that both princes were well–loved was clearly no disadvantage. All things considered, it would be best, the Pazhuvettarayars decided, to contain themselves until the old man's death before proceeding with their diabolical plan. Some such intention seemed to have possessed Sundara Chozhar's mind too, they learnt—and if this was so, all obstacles would be automatically removed in one fell stroke. Only two people could possibly prove a hindrance to this marvelous conclusion: Ilaiya Piratti, and Sembian Maadevi. The former's ruses could easily be vanquished by devious counter–stratagems—but to gainsay a venerable queen mother, a divine personage renowned, nay, worshipped by Tamilagam … ah, that would be no easy task.

That Sembian Maadevi did not wish her son to ascend the throne was a fact well-known. And if Madhuranthakan should actually do so in direct contradiction of her express wish—would the people accept such a one? There were only two options available, now: either that formidable dowager ought to follow her august husband's footsteps into Kailasam—or experience a change of heart. And who but a son possessed the power to overturn a mother's stubborn idiosyncrasies?

Thus the Pazhuvettarayars focused their considerable energies into persuading Madhuranthaka Thevar to work his magic upon Sembian Maadevi—but the prince was loathe to do so, for some reason. Kandaradhithar's son who was straining at the leash to assume Chozha kingship, hesitated to discuss the very subject with his mother—he shrank from even meeting her for that purpose.

Now, however, Sembian Maadevi herself had sent a communiqué to Thanjai: one of her revered husband's wishes—an important one at that—had to be carried out; it would gladden her heart if her son were by her side at this important juncture, she had written. The time was right, Chinna Pazhuvettarayar acknowledged: Madhuranthakar would do well to visit Sembian Maadevi—and persuade her, somehow, into acknowledging her son's right to the Chozha throne.

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17

Thirunaaraiyur Nambi

Madhuranthaka Thevar entered the divine city of Pazhaiyarai with his considerable entourage, Vandhiyathevan in tow; the procession glided with due pomp and glory through the sections where lay quartered Chozha soldiers and their families: *Aariyappadai Veedu*; *Pambaippadai Veedu*; *Pudhuppadai Veedu*; *Manappadai Veedu*. Then, bustling market avenues; residential areas; shrines and *sannithi* streets that surrounded said shrines. Few were the heads that craned out of homes to peer at the cavalcade in matter-of-fact fashion; Vandhiyathevan noticed that the city was markedly devoid of cheer.

Ah, the surging spirits; the overflowing enthusiasm that had deluged Pazhaiyarai during his first ever visit! Now, though, the streets were deserted enough to raise suspicion about whether the area was even inhabited. Not the dullest creature could misunderstand the lack of liveliness: Madhuranthaka Thevar was not esteemed by the good people of Pazhaiyarai. This, Vandhiyathevan mused, was rather to his own advantage: the chances of being recognized and consequent troubles were infinitesimal.

Approaching the hoary royal avenue housing sprawling Chozha palaces, the entourage caught sight of another large procession marching from a different direction—with a large, open palanquin in its midst. Its occupant was not immediately recognized but that he was a staunch Saivite, a *Sivanadiyaar* and a youth, was readily seen. Crowds pushed and jostled before and after the palanquin; a few raised a melodious, rhythmic jingle with the bells in their hands, singing harmoniously.

“Thiruchitrambalam!” Piercing chants cut through the air; “Harahara Mahadeva!”—“Long live Thirunaaraiyur Nambi!” and even “Blessed of Pollaa Pillaiyaar—*Vaazhga*!” rose into the skies, deafening the gathering.

Madhuranthakar, eyeing the riotous procession with considerable resentment, turned to a soldier by his side and put a question. “Indeed, yes; it is Thirunaaraiyur Nambi in the palanquin,” answered that worthy.

“Well, really—this passes all bounds,” muttered the prince. “Such commotion! What an uproarious welcome for this Nambi when there’s not a wretched soul to notice us!”

The procession wended its way some distance ahead, but it did seem to Vandhiyathevan that one of the men close to the palanquin was the Veera Saivite who had engaged in serious altercation with Azhwarkkadiyaan in a boat, during the Kollidam crossing.

Madhuranthakar and his entourage finally entered the avenue and into the precincts of Sembian Maadevi’s mansion, the entrance to which was graced by none other than Periya Piratti herself; she seemed in eager expectation of someone. The prince descended from his chariot, approached his mother, bent to touch her feet and was swiftly raised to a heartfelt embrace. “At a good moment, my son,” murmured that lady, with a kiss of benediction upon his forehead. “Thirunaaraiyur Nambi is almost here; rest if you must, but do make sure you are present at the *sabha mandapam* as soon as you can!”

Madhuranthakar’s face fell almost ludicrously, Vandhiyathevan noticed with some pity; doubtless, the prince had assumed Periya Piratti to be awaiting her son at the palace entrance—but ah, what a disappointment to realize that a Saivite in a palanquin was the recipient of such solicitude! Hardly surprising that Madhuranthakar—heir apparent to the Chozha throne in his imagination—should feel himself slighted.

They removed, next, to the section of the palace set aside for the prince, where he divested himself of his attire and ornaments with a deliberation that revealed his disinclination to go to court, despite the endless stream of messengers from his mother. When, in the end, he finally deigned to array himself to his satisfaction, he glanced around authoritatively. “That soothsayer; where’s he?”

Vandhiyathevan, who had barely been able to stay still—so eager was he to leave—promptly appeared. “I am ready,” and soon followed in the wake of Madhuranthakar and a few others.

The *sabha mandapam* was already filled to capacity; on one side, seated with a grace becoming of royalty were Sembian Maadevi, Kundhavai Piratti and several highborn ladies while in the heart of the chamber, upon a richly decorated low seat, a *peedam*, sat a young man. Body liberally adorned with sacred ash and *rudraksha* necklaces, his face shone with a beatific, spiritual glow. A few palm-leaves lay in front of him, while he held an *olai* in his hand. An older man, equally decorated in *viboothi* stood by the side, clearly wreathed in divine ecstasy; several others were squeezed into the chamber as well.

The youngster occupying pride of place was clearly the one in the palanquin and the other, by the side was the quarrelsome Saivite of Kollidam fame, Vandhiyathevan recognized. His restless eyes might swerve here, there and everywhere in the *mandapam* but they rested, in the end, upon the exquisite young woman seated in state beside Periya Piratti. As for Kundhavai herself, her limpid eyes widened in astonishment as they registered his presence—but only for a moment; Vallavarayan might never have existed, for all the notice she accorded him. Doubt shook him suddenly; hadn't she recognized him, perhaps?

Excepting the ladies, the whole court rose in reverence at Madhuranthakar's entrance, resuming their seats once he had taken his throne.

"Kumara," Sembian Maadevi addressed her son with some affection. "This young man, Nambi, hails from Thirunaaraiyur, and is blessed with the divine grace of the deity Pollaa Pillaiyaar. By a great stroke of heavenly fortune, he has managed to unearth several *Thevaram* hymns hitherto unknown to us. You know, of course, of the illustrious Maharani Mangaiyarkkarasi Devi, scion of our Chozha clan who later graced the Pandiya throne, and that it was in response to her gentle request that Gnana Sambandhar, whom we revere as *Aaludaiya Pillaiyaar*, visited Madurai. Needless to say, he achieved a spectacular victory in a debate against Jains—and the *pathigams* he composed during his sojourn in that great city have found their way to this young man; Sambhanda Swamy has even sung of our gracious princess, light of the Chozhas—and I must admit, my body thrills with exhilaration when I listen to them. Ah, how delighted your sainted father would have been! I should like you, at least, to share my happiness—"

“Certainly, *Thaaye*,” Madhuranthakar replied dutifully. “Let them begin.” But his dreary expression gave the lie to his words; his heart was clearly elsewhere. To seat a man—an ordinary boy with nothing to his credit except a face full of sacred ash and a body strung with *rudraksha* chains!—on an elaborately ornamented *peedam* in the royal court and shower him with such distinguished attention was not quite to Madhuranthakar’s fine taste. Outrageous folly, he fumed, subsiding into his seat out of respect for his mother’s sentiments.

Thirunaaraiyur Nambi, recipient of Polla Pillaiyaar’s divine grace, gazed at the *olai* in his hands and began with the *pathigams* sung by Gnana Sambandhar upon his first sight of Madurai. “Ah, is not this wondrous city the residence of Mangaiyarkkarasi, the very epitome of Siva devotion!” exulted the prodigy, and promptly launched into verse thus:

“Mangaiyarkkarasi Valavarkon paavai

Varivalaik kai madamaani

Pangaya chelvi Pandimaadevi

Pani seythu naadorum parava

Pongazhaluruvan boodha naayaganaal

Vedhamum porulkalum aruli

Angayarkanni thannodum amarntha

Aalavaayaavadhum idhuve!

Mannelaam nikazha mannanaal mannum

Manimudi Chozhanran magalaam

Panniner mozhiyaal Pandimaadevi

Paanginaar pani seythu parava

Vinnulor iruvar keezhodumelum

Alapparithaam vagai ninra

Annalaar Umaiyodu inburukinra

Aalavaayaavadhum idhuve!”

Sembian Maadevi’s eyes filled; pearly, translucent tears rolled down her withered cheeks as her heart swelled and reveled in a glorified state of contentment. Ah, what rigorous penances had she done in a previous birth to have entered a state of holy matrimony—why, attain the position of a Maharani, even—into the same illustrious dynasty that had borne the peerless Mangaiyarkkarasi!

Madhuranthakar, however, harboured markedly different sentiments. *“Mannelaam nigazha mannanaal mannum mani mudi Chozhan …”*—was the only verse to have made any impression upon him; he grit his teeth in sheer chagrin at the thought of the glittering Chozha crown of such a magnificent, ancient dynasty now upon the head of a usurper, rather than his own noble brow.

Sambandhar seeks an audience with Mangaiyarkkarasi, who gazes at the youngster with justifiable concern: *Ayyo, how can a boy of such tender years engage in ferocious debate with ogre-like Samanars, those brahmarakshasas, and win?* Said youngster though, allays her fears thus:

Maaniner vizhi maatharaai vazhudhikku

Maaperum devi kel!

Paanalvaayoru baalan eengivan

Enru nee pariveithidel!

Aanai maamalaiyaathiyaa

Idangalir pala allal ser

Eenarkat keliyen alenthiru

Aalavaayaran nirkave!

For a few glorious moments, as the *pathigams* were recited soulfully, Sembian Maadevi was transported to an era bygone where she herself was the anxious yet hopeful Queen Mangaiyarkkarasi with the youthful Thirunaaraiyur Nambi assuming the role of Sambandhar, and lost herself in divine contemplation, experiencing something of the pure, unadulterated bliss achieved only by the utterly devout.

Madhuranthaka Thevar, for his part, had chosen to travel along a tangent: *I'm a naïve youngster, no doubt*, his mind fumed, paraphrasing Sambandhar's brave declaration; *but take fright at the sight of Thirukkovilur Malayaman; Kodumbalur Boodhi Vikrama Kesari and the sons of Sundara Chozhar, who claim their support? Never—not on my life! After all, the Pazhuvettarayars uphold me, just as the divine Aalavaayaran stood by Sambandhar!*

As for Vandhiyathevan … well, it was safe to say that nothing of these mellifluous verses ever entered his head, for his eyes, ears and heart were focused to the exclusion of everything else, on Kundhavai Devi. Hadn't she recognized him? *Had* she and was deliberately ignoring him—or wait, worse: was she furious, perhaps, that he hadn't come to her the moment his task was complete? Even as his imagination hurtled through each and every horrifying possibility, his fertile brain revolved elaborate schemes to seek a private audience, and convey his news.

When the recital finally came to an end, Sembian Maadevi turned her attention to the older man standing in an aspect of utter devotion. "It seems to me, *Ayya*, that this young man is the reincarnation of Gnana Sambandhar himself. I must beg you to escort him to every village in Tamilagam; make sure to gather all the *pathigams* you can find, for it is my earnest desire to have individual collections of the hymns composed by Appar; Sambandhar and Sundaramurthy. They must also be recited, every day, in Siva shrines across the land. This was my husband's ambition as well—and I would dearly like to see it come to fruition in my lifetime. Such necessities as palanquins; men; entourage and other essentials shall be my responsibility; my own son shall be my envoy to the Chakravarthy to receive sanction!"

The delighted applause and ecstatic, rousing chants that rose at this announcement crashed into Madhuranthakar's ears like a deluge of nauseating, raucous notes of sheer cacophony.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Aaludaiya Pillaiyaar

A title of great affection and reverence bestowed upon Sambandhar—for this devout child was said to have been nurtured by Siva Peruman and his divine consort Parvathi, as their own son.

18

Nimithakkaaran

The end of the felicitation to honour Nambiyaandaar Nambi; as the court began to disperse, the dowager queen's eyes searched for her son. "I shall return once I've bidden farewell to our esteemed visitors at the palace gates, Child," she said, once she found him. "You may take your ease in your quarters and return, for there is something of great importance that I wish to discuss."

"Of course, *Thaaye*," mumbled Madhuranthakar and swept to his section of the palace, resentment and wrath blistering his heart like a rumbling volcano about to erupt. Ha!—what a welcome, what an uproarious reception; what wondrous, unheard of honours for a poor, wretched lout of a hermit, likely one of the thousands that littered temples, soaked in sacred ash and begging for a meal! To think of his mother catering to the whims and fancies of such a commoner—wasn't the very pride of his ancient dynasty in danger of being ground into the dust by such thoughtless actions? Hardly a surprise, then, that the Pazhuvettarayars were always muttering a litany of complaints against her; it would seem they had a point. A body full of grey ash, limbs groaning under the weight of several *rudraksha* necklaces, and that was it; a superficial *pathigam* on loose lips or shallow talk of temples, tanks and holy reconstruction—these were all the old woman required to empty the royal treasury and deck beggars with riches! As if her excesses weren't enough, there was now Princess Kundhavai by her side as well, looking for a chance to do her bit: anything left from enriching wretched ascetics was now staked by the younger woman who lost no time in setting up infirmaries.

What of my fate, Madhuranthakar fumed. *My hopes, dreams, manoradhams—what of them if these thoughtless females are allowed to have their way so much? How do I send out massive Chozha armies in every direction, extend my empire and bring the entire world under my rule?*

And now, here was the dowager, wishful for some sort of important private discussion! Upon what precious subject, one had to wonder: perhaps the intricacies of spiritual practices? *Ashtaanga Yogam*; *Iyama*, *Niyama Nithithyaasanam*… their evolution and existential crisis? A deep and startling insight into raising the Kundalini force and thereby understanding the Secret of Imbibing all Sixty-four Arts known to humankind by means of staring, cross-eyed, at the tip of your nose? An elaborate, detailed and intensely boring study into the subtext of Natarajar's divine, cosmic dance by the simple expedient of peering at his high crown of matted hair; the crescent moon gleaming upon said crown—***bah***! Hadn't enough damage been done by this spiritual drivel? Hadn't his beloved mother turned him into a soft-headed idiot in the eyes of the world, spouting this nonsense day in and day out? Well, no more. He wasn't going to allow her to drum her pet-beliefs into him and if she did insist, he'd simply have to ignore her…

But wait; there was something else he needed to do, before his mother could call for him—speak with that soothsayer. How could *he* have known things—two secret, mysterious events completely concealed from the world? How entirely perplexing! The man must be possessed of some strange, wondrous power in truth; could he, perhaps divine the future as he had obviously done the past? There was only one way to test this: *I must ask him.*

On the point of leaving the *sabha mandapam*, Madhuranthakar could not but notice the *nimithakkaaran* take hesitant steps, eyes darting here and there; the prince made a sign that clearly conveyed a command for the soothsayer to follow.

Vandhiyathevan, whose restless eyes had tried to engage the princess's to communicate a wordless message, found his heart sinking; Kundhavai had left in company of the dowager queen without even a backward glance.

Good God, he wondered, bemused. Had her royal highness forgotten him? There couldn't be any other explanation: she was an exalted personage, granting audience to thousands each day after all; to expect her to remember a man whose face she might have glimpsed once or twice was too much. *More fool, you*, he reproached himself. *So many obstacles; mortal peril and terrifying adventures have I*

successfully overcome with only the memory of her exquisite, divine features—but why must she return the favour? A bee may hover endlessly over a flower; must the bloom care? No, it beams soulfully upon the sun, of course. I wonder, he thought, disheartened. *I wonder about the Sun God, the Surya Devan who might unfurl the fragrant, beautiful flower of Kundhavai's lovely countenance. Who might possess such captivating power?*

And yet—surely she must feel some anticipation; a need, an eagerness to know the result of his mission. Could someone else have informed her of its conclusion? But how could they? No, no—impossible. The anxiety marring her features couldn't have revealed more clearly the depression of her spirits; she was labouring under some sort of apprehension, and likely hadn't recognized him. How indeed could she? To find her personal envoy, entrusted with a secret message to Ilankai—now amongst the entourage surrounding Madhuranthaka Thevar in court, of all places! It passed all comprehension; *it would've been marvelous if she **had** known me*, he explained to himself. *Aha, when I reveal the wonderfully devious ruses I employed to enter the city and meet her—but how on earth do I accomplish that? Or even send a message—*

"Lost in thought?" Madhuranthakar's voice jerked him out of his reverie; Vandhiyathevan turned, startled. "What about, *Nimithakkaaraa*?" By this time, the entourage had reached the chambers allotted to the prince.

Many were the men in those days—astrologers, fortune-tellers, palm-readers and the like—who swore that they could predict the future with a startling degree of accuracy: astrologers peered into horoscopes to chart the courses of planets and stars; fortune-tellers pored over the utterances of those seeking their services, the exact moment during which omens were sought and a number chosen by clients between one and hundred and eight, thus delivering vague predictions about approaching fortunes, good or bad; palmistry, however, had retained much of its original stock-in-trade and remained more or less the same over centuries.

Soothsayers, on the other hand, possessed the ability to glimpse the future, not unlike sages with the gift of foresight. Focusing their

considerable mental strength they could dissect time, it was said, as if it flowed in front of their mind's eye. Some closed their eyes in meditation; others stared into glowing fire, concentrating on the leaping flames and thus seeing the past and future unfold. There were even supremely gifted soothsayers who could recite a person's history and future with just a look at their face. Aside from all these, there were ordinary ones who tracked a crow's flight left or right and based on such external events, made predictions.

The way Madhuranthakar had addressed him—"*Nimithakkaaraa*!"—had rather alarmed Vandhiyathevan. What terrifying questions was this prince going to fling at his head? He hadn't the slightest idea, except that it behooved him to use all his considerable cunning to slip out of this one—and good heavens; how was he to escape this royal's clutches and gain a private audience with the princess?

"Nothing of importance, *Ayya*," Vandhiyathevan rallied. "Just that I'd have done better to memorize a few *pathigams* like the youngster we saw today in court, rather than be a soothsayer. Ah, wouldn't I have been feted and honoured to the hilt, then?"

"It isn't too late even now; learn all the *Thevaram* hymns you want, why don't you?"

"There's no gainsaying one's destiny, your highness. What's the point of futile ambition?"

"The youngster we saw today, singing hymns—what did you think? His destiny is …?"

"A marvelous one, combining the favour of Kings and God, alike; both will honour him. His name shall endure in the great pantheon of saints for as long as the earth shall exist."

Vandhiyathevan may have rattled off a meaningless spiel—but its effect on Madhuranthakar was unforeseen, kindling a blaze of thrilled anticipation. "And … what about my own fortune? Speak!"

"Yours mirrors the boy's, Highness; a blend of *sivayogam* and *rajayogam*—but of a far, far superior nature, of course."

“In detail, *Appane*.”

“It isn’t quite that easy,” Vallavarayan, desperately in need of time, promptly stalled. “Predictions such as these require several essentials: a lamp’s gentle glow; the infusion of *akhil* incense, combined with your honoured presence behind the lamp—upon which I may be able to look into the future and describe events as I see them.”

Gripped by a frenzy that sought instant release, Madhuranthakar swiftly ordered the fulfillment of these requirements. Two *manais*, or flat wooden seats were placed on either side of the lamp, occupied by the prince and the much-vaunted soothsayer.

Vandhiyathevan lost himself in meditation for a while, lips muttering *mandhirams* indistinguishable even to keen observers. Abruptly he gave an artistic shudder as though overcome by a divine force; his body quivered and trembled like that of a *veriyattakkaran* in the grip of primal energy, about to throw open the door to a magnificent, celestial world.

His eyes flew wide open; he stared hard at the lamp’s steady glow. This went on for a while until finally, Vandhiyathevan transferred his attention to Madhuranthaka Thevar as though he could barely tear himself away from the flame. “Forgive me, *Ayya*, if I’ve been remiss in showing you the reverence that is your due—for yours is no ordinary destiny but one that surpasses all that I’ve seen so far; certainly, there’s no comparison between the fortunes of that boy singing hymns in court, and your exalted state. That one’s fate and kingly honours lie in the hands of royals, but what I see of yours in this lamp … aha, words fail me!”

“What? What do you see?” Madhuranthakar demanded. “Tell me—go on!”

“My stunned brain can barely form a coherent sentence, your highness, but since you ask … row upon infinite row of kings stand respectfully, their noble brows decorated with glittering crowns; by their side are ministers, *Samanthakars* and officers of court; beyond them ebb and flow a veritable sea of men, soldiers—ah, I cannot see an end to their lines! My eyes smart at their dazzling spears, swords, and the spotless armour shielding their chests. Scores of people jostle for space

upon terraces and balconies of mansions and palaces in the distance, cheering aloud; men and women even crowd upon fort walls and battlements—they say—they shout and chant—scream something —!”

“Well, man? What is it? What do they chant?”

“My ears ring at the roar of a thousand strident voices—I cannot make it out—ah yes, there it is! The shouts are—*Long live the scion of the Chozha dynasty*!—*Thribhuvana Chakravarthy Vaazhga*!—*Long live the King of Kings*! … at least, so it seems to me.”

“And? What else?”

“The people are thronging—they’re surging forward. Soldiers bearing swords and spears bar their way—they thrust them back—and all is a loud cacophony of shouts and screams.”

“Very well, very well—and why has a crowd gathered?”Madhuranthakar insisted, goaded beyond endurance. “Come on!”

“I’m about to glimpse that too, I think. Amidst the crowd rises high the tiger flag, fluttering in the breeze; below are banners bearing a fish; a bow; a palm-tree; lion; *rishabam*; boar—so many others. Ah, I see a splendidly ornate *sabha mandapam*—built upon magnificent dimensions, with a beauty that would proclaim the work of the otherworldly architect, Mayan himself!—and within stands a golden throne set with the fabled nine precious gems. Beside is a *peedam* upon which rests a lustrous crown, studded with diamonds that blind the eye with the brilliance of a hundred thousand suns! High above the throne unfurls a golden state umbrella, offering the cool luster of a pearly full moon. Lovely maidens stand about like celestial nymphs, holding aloft white *saamarams*, ready to fan esteemed guests. Golden pots stand in a long row, filled to the brim with holy waters from a dozen sacred rivers and tanks. Everything seems to be set in train, your highness, for a *pattabishekam* …”

“A coronation for whom, *Appane*?” Madhuranthakar could barely contain himself. “Tell me that, quick!”

“In a moment, for—there! The *sabha mandapam*’s large, ornate doors are thrown open; ushers march in with loud, official proclamations … and I see a most majestic old man; there’s another who could be his brother. Behind them strides a handsome personage rivalling Manmadhan for perfect, bewitching features, the very embodiment of beauty indeed—”

“And? Who is it?” Madhuranthakar almost panted with eagerness. “Who is he?”

Vandhiyathevan threw another keen glance at him, before losing himself in the lamp’s even glow. “Why, of all the—! He looks exactly like you, *Ayya*—wait, no—he *is* you! The first two mentioned lead you to the throne; a loud chant rises like the very ocean’s roar: *Jayavijayi Bhava*! An hundred hands shower fragrant flowers, gems and turmeric-hued grains upon your sacred person; you approach ever closer to the throne but … ah, what’s this? *Adada*, who dares to bar your path like an ill omen? Ah, a woman, her tresses flying about, comes between you and the throne: ***No***, she screams. You push her away—ah, oh—how unfortunate! Smoke mars my sight; I cannot see—”

“Go on—do it! Look into it, man! Focus—what else?”

“Forgive me, Highness; a massive smoke screen obscures my vision …”

“You *must* see, *Appane*—at least tell me about that woman! Have you seen her before?”

“The gracious lady has vanished, *Ayya*, as have you—as indeed, the court, throne, crown and everything else. Perhaps there’s someone here, in this very palace, with magical skills to rival my own—they may have used a counter-spell to ruin my vision—oh! My skin—ah, it burns!” And Vandhiyathevan covered his face with his hands. After a while, he spread apart his fingers and peered through them.

Every nerve in Madhuranthakar’s body seemed to swell and throb; his countenance was suffused with a wrath that could find no release in words. Large eyes burned like glowing embers and Vandhiyathevan

actually shrank back, more panicked than he cared to admit. Had he roused a little more than he'd bargained?

"Again," growled Madhuranthakar. "Look—carefully! And tell me!"

"I'm afraid that would be useless, Highness—a vision once seen cannot be summoned again. A few days later, perhaps. I could look into the lamp's light and tell you something else, if you wish."

"Go on, then. Tell me whatever you see!"

"I see a large mob—a confused, furious group. Grieving and angry. An envoy appears with news—a member of the royal family has been lost at sea…" Vandhiyathevan directed a careful glance at the avidly listening prince. "*Ayyo*—the crazed, frenzied throng surrounds the envoy and proceeds to attack him—ah, your highness, I beseech you to not go amongst the people under such circumstances. And if you should, pray be careful!"

"The name of the one claimed by the sea?"

"I cannot—the pandemonium and uproar is just too much—the scene has vanished. Now," Vandhiyathevan continued. "In front of my eyes spreads an incredible sight: a fearsome group of men decked in terrifying skull necklaces—Kaapaalikars, or are they Kaalaamukars? One stands apart, holding aloft a frightening scythe. A sacrificial altar is in front of him. Ah, a prince appears here too; the Kaalaamukars surround him in a raucous romp. *Ayyo*, do not, I beg of you, ever go amidst such creatures—"

Beads of perspiration dotted Madhuranthakar's face; his body trembled. Vandhiyathevan, noticing these promising signs, came to a decision. "Forgive me, your highness, but I can see no more," his voice held a wealth of remorse. "My head spins; darkness obscures my sight. I fear a much powerful counter-spell … you must allow me to retire; perhaps another session, later." And he buried his head in his hands.

A palace attendant appeared at this moment with a summons for the prince from the dowager queen, Sembian Maadevi. Madhuranthakar banked the fury that seemed to roil through him like molten lava—and

decided that he would treat his unsuspecting mother to a taste of his wrath, unleashed.

“My head aches fit to split, *Ayya*,” Vandhiyathevan announced to the prince, about to leave. “I hope I have your permission to tour the city a little—the fresh air might clear my senses.” Consent was duly granted.

***

Pinakapani, the physician’s son from Pazhaiyarai, had lately discovered a new zest for life. Thus far he had been satisfied to learn the intricacies of medicine from his father—until his journey to Kodikkarai in the company of a certain Vaanar warrior, of course. Vandhiyathevan had opened his eyes, in a manner of speaking, introducing a whole new world and its dazzling precepts—but this was by no means all he did.

One’s first ever love is always a strong motivation for involved monologues on the subject—and Vandhiyathevan, having tumbled headlong into his own fairytale was eager for a captive audience. One glance at the physician’s son had convinced the Vaanar warrior of his utter stupidity and he had embarked, with great glee, on the subject of women and the dangers of romantic attachment. Who better to instruct an innocent in these arts than Vandhiyathevan himself, he claimed, who had experienced love for the first time and was even now buffeted by waves of exhilaration and sorrow by turns?

This sort of artless speech had not exactly been to Pinakapani’s taste in the beginning—but his mind changed, by degrees, fostering a nameless resentment which found basis in nothing concrete, to tell the truth. He spent considerable energy in trying to discover something of the maiden who had stolen Vandhiyathevan’s heart—her name and residence, for instance—to no avail. Pinakapani chose to take umbrage at his companion’s behaviour; his anger grew by leaps and bounds; by the time the duo touched Kodikkarai, the Vaanar warrior had begun to figure in his mind as an implacable enemy, almost.

But if he thought that the end of their journey would bring some relief, he was wrong.

Suppressed emotions turned unruly, even chaotic at the very sight of Poonguzhali; the spark of need in his heart burst into flames. His lacerated feelings found no reprieve when he realized that far from liking him, she loathed him from the bottom of her heart, mocking him into the bargain. The knowledge that she held Vandhiyathevan in greater esteem was like a spear to a gaping, open wound: Pinakapani's cup of woes was full; his insanity complete. Not a smidgeon of remorse did he feel at betraying his erstwhile friend to the soldiers following in their wake.

Pazhuvettarayar's men, however, captured the physician's son in Vandhiyathevan's place; forced behind bars in Thanjavur's dungeons, a pit of grave infamy, Pinakapani had no difficulty in chalking these misfortunes to Vandhiyathevan's credit.

We saw, earlier, his release from prison even before Princess Kundhavai managed to negotiate his freedom; needless to say, his benefactor had been none other than the young queen of Pazhuvoor.

Nandhini's outrage and qualms at Vandhiyathevan's abrupt departure from the Thanjai palace were not inconsiderable; his entry into Pazhaiyarai and eventual arrival in Ilankai only served to fuel her suspicion. It was not difficult for her to deduce that the Vaanar warrior would return to the city to meet princess Kundhavai—in which case she, Nandhini, needed a trustworthy spy to discover Vandhiyathevan's whereabouts, and send word immediately.

A discussion with the physician's son was enough to convince her of his suitability for the task; she entrusted him with this truly onerous responsibility at once. "I foresee the day your betrayer returns to Pazhaiyarai," she cooed. "Watch for him; spy upon his movements. Learn where he goes, what he does and report to me at once. Earn my trust; please my heart—and I shall reward you richly."

It did not take long for Chinna Pazhuvettarayar to follow suit regarding Vandhiyathevan. "Bring that royal traitor to me when he returns, and I shall enroll you in my spy network; you shall be a great officer in no time," had been his personal bribe.

No more did medicine hold Pinakapani's attention or interest; his time was now spent endlessly roaming the streets of Pazhaiyarai,

indulging in futile fantasies and castles in the air. Such was his zeal that suspicion attacked him on a regular basis, prompting him often to run towards random passersby and peer into their faces. Having subjected strangers to sharp scrutiny he would step back, disappointed. “No, not him,” he would mutter to himself, walking away. Hardly surprising that the many witnesses of these bizarre scenes were convinced that the physician’s son was fast losing his wits. There was a tenacious streak in Pinakapani, however, that made him persevere in what seemed a thankless task.

For all this, he had not paid particular attention to Madhuranthaka Thevar and his entourage entering Pazhaiyarai, as the suspicion that Vandhiyathevan could be amongst their number had not entered his head; rather, he had bent his energies towards Thirunaaraiyur Nambi, sniffing around that worthy’s palanquin and the huge, milling crowds. Out of the corner of his eye, he had spotted the prince’s cavalcade in the distance; a man on a stallion by Madhuranthakar’s side had turned once, attracting the spy’s attention—and thereby, igniting a spark of doubt.

But the man had disappeared into the palace within moments, and Pinakapani’s suspicions remained unresolved.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Srama Parihaaram

Sembian Maadevi uses this phrase when speaking to her son, at the beginning of this chapter. An old-fashioned usage that literally means, to take one’s ease and relieve fatigue.

Nayana Bhaashai

Another of Kalki’s beautiful expressions, often used to describe eyes communicating messages. Literally, the Language of Eyes. Vandhiyathevan seeks this medium often, particularly with Kundhavai.

19
Samaya Sanjeevi

Pinakapani had found it impossible to enter the *sabha mandapam* felicitating the renowned Nambiyaandaar Nambi; he had tried to peer in, instead, from amidst a large jostling crowd some distance from the entrance. Even as Vandhiyathevan's attention was focused elsewhere, as we saw, the physician's son had fixed his eyes on the warrior's face, staring for all he was worth.

But someone else was present in court—someone whose sharp gaze had noticed everything but yet chosen not to pay undue attention to this interesting by-play: our friend of old, Azhwarkkadiyaan.

The moment Vandhiyathevan stepped out of the palace confines, having raised considerable qualms in Madhuranthakar and well addled that prince's mind, Pinakapani, who had been observing him from afar, walked up. "And who are you, *Appane*?"

He might be considerably startled at the other's sudden appearance, but Vallavarayan was adept at preserving his countenance. "Did you ask me something?"

"Only who you were."

"Ha, you wish to know that, do you? And with which me would you like to get acquainted? This puny body, made of the universe's five elements, the *panchaboothams* such as earth, water, *Theyu*, *Vayu* and the sky? Or the soul, my *atma*, the foundation for this body's existence? The *Paramatma*, perhaps, which is the basis of the soul itself? What sort of a question is this, my man? There's neither I nor You; there's nothing but *Iraivan*, in truth! This world is an enormous, complicated illusion; its workings the divine sport of the Gods—and as for spiritual meaning bundled into ancient concepts as *pasu*, *pathi* and *paasam*—you'd do well to educate yourself at the noble hands of a saint such as Thirunaaraiyur Nambi!" With this truly splendid peroration, Vandhiyathevan leapt upon

his horse, tethered at the palace gates. Spurring his steed into a gallop, he made sure that Pinakapani was not at his heels before slowing to a gentle canter.

The physician's son, made of sterner stuff, was not deceived. His suspicions were now justified, he decided, and promptly stalked to the city's chief of security to acquaint him with the truth. Upon being assigned two men, he took to roaming the streets, finally running down Vandhiyathevan, as fully expected, in an intersection. "This is the man!" screamed Pinakapani at once. "Arrest him!"

"Are you insane, fellow?" Vallavarayan demanded.

"Who're you calling insane? This puny body; the soul, its foundation —the *Paramatma* dwelling within?" The physician's son smocked. "Or *pasu*, *pathi* and *paasam*?"

"Your ridiculous babble betrays your madness, you know."

"I'm no lunatic, no *paithyam*; rather, the one who accompanied you to Kodikkarai—the son of Pazhaiyarai's *vaidhyan*! Heed me, guards, for this man is the dangerous spy who escaped the Thanjai fort to Ilankai—arrest him at once!"

The men stepped gingerly towards Vandhiyathevan, who stiffened at once. "Careful! I'd rather you didn't take this one's words to heart for I'm a soothsayer with Madhuranthakar's entourage."

"No, no, a liar, I say—bind him in chains!" shrieked the physician's son.

Not unnaturally, a considerable crowd gathered at this ruckus, with some supporting Vandhiyathevan while others sided with Pinakapani.

"The man doesn't look like a *nimithakkaaran*," remarked one observant bystander, eyes raking the Vaanar warrior from head to toe.

"Not a spy or an *otran* either," shot back another.

"A soothsayer so young in years! Unbelievable, that."

“A spy who canters around the city in full view of the public! Unbelievable that, too.”

“Why would a *nimithakkaaran* need a broadsword?”

“If indeed an *otran*, whose—and what’s he spying upon in Pazhaiyarai?”

“Seize him!” Pinakapani was beside himself. “Tie him up now—arrest this man! By order of the Pazhuvettarayars!”

That word seemed to work its magic—for most of the gathering immediately felt a sudden, distinct sympathy for Vandhiyathevan and began to seek ways to help him escape.

It was at this opportune moment that Azhwarkkadiyaan put in an appearance, at the edge of the mob. “The soothsayer in company of the prince—is he here?” He demanded in a gloriously loud voice.

“No—the man’s a spy!” screeched Pinakapani, now at the end of his tether.

“I’ve no time for preposterous nonsense,” Azhwarkkadiyaan’s nose was appropriately in the air. “You,” he addressed Vandhiyathevan. “If you were part of Madhuranthaka Thevar’s entourage, come along; the princess asks for you.”

Vandhiyathevan’s heart leapt. “I’m indeed the soothsayer,” he acknowledged. “Right away—”

“No—don’t!” Pinakapani’s screams reached a crescendo. ***“Don’t let him go!”***

“It rests upon you now to prove the truth, doesn’t it?” Azhwarkkadiyaan put forth, with a small smile. “Only then can you accompany me.”His eyes flickered in an unmistakable sign.

Vandhiyathevan, whose own sharp gaze had not failed to notice this, was eager to seize the opportunity. “How? How do you wish me to prove myself?”

“Easy enough. You see those two stallions, thundering towards us?” Azhwarkkadiyaan pointed. “The soldiers upon them seem to be bursting with urgent tidings—which you must predict.”

At once, Vandhiyathevan peered intently at the approaching horsemen. “Well, why not?” He closed his eyes as though in concentration. “A member of the royal family has met with an accident involving water—a *jalakanda vibathu*, as they say—and these men bring news of that sorrowful event.”

He had barely stopped speaking when the riders were almost upon them, stopping perforce as the jostling, pushing throng halted progress.

“Envoys, I believe,” Azhwarkkadiyaan began, before interruptions could occur. “What news, pray?”

“Indeed, we messengers rue our task for our tidings are grievous,” said one. “The vessel bearing the gracious person of Prince Arulmozhi Varmar was caught in a whirlwind; our beloved Ilango jumped into the sea to save someone—and was lost!”

“*Ayyo*!” Loud, horrified screams burst out as the crowd assimilated this tragedy. “*Ayyago*!” rose more heart-rending, mournful cries, fit to break souls as the assemblage swelled; no one could quite say how such a heaving, sobbing mass had gathered or even where such a swarm had suddenly erupted from. Women and men; old, doddering citizens and youngsters, even children surrounded the riders in a trembling storm of emotion: questions flew thick and fast while most began to wail and sob.

That the Pazhuvettarayars cherished no love for Arulmozhi Varmar was a fact not unknown to the good people of Pazhaiyarai; rumours—not ill-founded, in fact—had been circulating amongst them for a while that the lords had dispatched men to Ilankai for the express purpose of imprisoning the royal. Barely moments passed before a few began to murmur their resentment; murmurs that soon grew and transformed into deafening, bitter shouts. *The Pazhuvettarayars must have drowned the prince*, people spat; their loud, rebellious voices; grief-stricken cries and the blistering curses upon the Pazhuvoor brothers ebbed and crested like the uproarious waves of a choppy, disturbed ocean.

Caught in the toils of this sea of humanity, the messengers from Thanjavur were washed this way and that, unable to make their way to the palace for they could not part the people who swirled into their paths, hurling a barrage of verbal obstacles: “How?”—“Where?”—“When?”—“Is this true?”

“And why do you stand like stocks, my good men?” Azhwarkkadiyaan promptly demanded of the soldiers accompanying the physician’s son. “Part these crowds so the messengers can approach the palace!”

The guards, themselves paralyzed at the shocking report, now regained senses and jumped into the fray; by slow degrees the ocean of people parted, allowing the riders to inch forward. The crowds were no less behind, however, surging forward in their wake, swelling visibly by the moment. Amidst the raging pandemonium, all mourning their loss, the terrible fate of Arulmozhi Varmar, however, one voice—one lone soul shrieked its woes to the world: “*Ayyo*—this is a ruse—meant to save the spy—*ayyo*!”

No one paid the slightest heed to Pinakapani’s outraged, feeble squeaks, soon drowned out by a massive mob’s throbbing roar. The physician’s son was swept by the seething human mass as a tiny, frail twig carried away by an unstoppable river’s deluge, on and on, inexorably.

As for Vandhiyathevan—that canny young man had slipped off his steed the moment crowds began to gather; he felt his hand being clasped in an uncompromising grip, to see Azhwarkkadiyaan by his side. “Leave the horse for now; you may retrieve it later,” came an urgent whisper into his ears. “Come with me right away!”

“At a good moment, Nambi,” panted Vallavarayan, as he made his painstaking way. “A *samaya sanjeevi* to be sure, entering at exactly the right moment to bail me out—I hardly dare imagine my fate if you hadn’t come along—”

“What else is new, pray?” Azhwarkkadiyaan retorted, his voice tinged with a touch of vindication. “This is fast becoming a habit: you

manage to get entangled in some sort of outrageous mess while a certain someone has to fight their way through to extricate you!”

The duo stood aside, careful not to be caught up in the churning, roiling mob; once this had passed, Nambi took his charge’s hands and practically dragged him in another direction, towards the avenue housing the royal palaces and into the residence at the very end—the locked dwelling we encountered, previously. On, into the house and then the garden, the *nandhavanam*, along paths interspersed by creepers and within moments, the end of their journey: a small stream, waters blue as the sky.

Upon its glittering surface floated a boat, and within sat a most gracious lady.

Vandhiyathevan’s heart skipped several beats in sheer exhilaration.

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20
Mother and Son

Madhuranthaka Thevar sauntered towards Sembian Maadevi's quarters in reluctant obedience to her summons.

The dowager Chozha queen's staunch devotion to Siva Peruman was well-known; practically the whole kingdom sang her praises without pause. So had her son, at one time—his affection had once been deep and true.

Circumstances changed, however; his sincere attachment had long since evaporated, to be replaced by an implacable fury. Why, where else did exist a mother willing to betray her own flesh and blood in favour of his paternal cousins? Not even in ancient tales did one hear of a woman siding with her son's *dhaayaadhi* relations! What was fate's quarrel with him that he'd been saddled with such a mother as this? Days passed in bitter cogitations; rancour and resentment corroded his soul. No semblance of love now existed in his heart; in its place roared, fiercely, the dangerous flame of hatred.

Some of this unbearable fury could not but abate at the sight of his mother's face, suffused with the unearthly serenity so rare in this world; he bent to touch her feet in an age-old gesture of obeisance.

"May you be enriched by the eternal wealth of devotion to Siva Peruman," blessed the Maharani—words that pierced Madhuranthakan; fire-arrows that fanned the flames of outrage, disturbing the temporary calm. "And is my *marumakal*, my daughter-in-law well?" she enquired. "What of your father-in-law? The *Dhanaadhikaari*'s family? How do they fare?"

"Well enough, I suppose," muttered her morose son. "Much you care for their well-being, anyway."

It was unclear if the Maharani noticed this sign of discontent, for she pushed on with her questions. "The Chakravarthy—did you manage to

seek an audience with him before you left Thanjai? How is his health now?”

“Not very well; he weakens each day, as I noticed when I took formal leave of him. His travails are more mental than physical, I should think.”

“Why, how can that be, Child? The Chakravarthy to suffer anguish—what could cause such a wretched state?”

“What wouldn’t? Perfectly natural for criminals—unjust, ignoble men who pounce upon and enjoy the possessions of others—to experience at least a minor degree of anxiety, isn’t it?”

“Natural? Good heavens, what words are these? What sort of crime or injustice has the Emperor perpetrated?”

“What *hasn’t* he done? To seize a throne that belongs to me by rights and plump himself upon it for years—if this isn’t an unimaginable crime, an injustice, what else is? What more must he do, pray?”

Sembian Maadevi studied her son for a long moment. “Your heart was pure as milk, once, Child,” she said finally, her voice filled with unmistakable sorrow. “But I see that it is poisoned, now—who has done this? Who could have corrupted your innocent mind thus?”

“No one. Do you really consider me such an ignorant fool? That I possess not a shred of common sense—or the ability to think for myself?”

“None of this had occurred to me, but it is true that the greatest mind may be tainted; the strongest personality might find itself giving way to whispers of malice and hatred. Remember the proverb: *Even stone cannot resist the persistent efforts of those who choose to melt it*. And have we not heard of Queen Kaikeyi’s noble sentiments poisoned by Kooni, the hunchbacked malcontent’s spiteful speeches?”

“Why yes—I know these proverbs and old tales; certainly, I’m aware that a woman’s mind may well be turned by hateful whispers.”

“Of whom do you speak, Madhuranthaka?”

“You’d better tell me the reason for your summons, *Thaaye*.”

“You were present at court just now, were you not?”

“Indeed. And had the immense misfortune to see you fetch a beggar, a wretched, penniless lad loafing the streets to this palace upon a richly decorated palanquin; I watched you place him upon an ornate throne and treat him with the hospitality that is the due of princes—he’s probably off his head with arrogant conceit, by now …”

“*Ayyo*, do not speak such appalling words, Child—our holy visitor today may have been young in years, but he is old in piety; an elevated soul, enlightened by his devotion to Siva …”

“I grudge him not his spiritual greatness; he may well be a saint, a *mahaan*, as you say—which means that my insults cannot destroy his worth, such as it is; I shall even be magnanimous and indulge your extraordinary and frankly unnecessary royal, right-regal treatment of him—but why must you bid me here?”

She heaved a deep, perturbed sigh. “I confess I am stunned at the change in you—and I cannot but suspect that your residence for two years in Pazhuvettarayar’s palace has wrought this … this transformation—not that I ever dreamt of such a possibility, at any time. Be that as it may—I have my duty from which I cannot shrink; a pledge to your father which I am honour-bound to fulfill. But before I enlarge on my reasons for asking you here, I must relate the history of our marriage; the circumstances under which I wed your father. Pray be patient, and listen carefully.”

As a mark of compliance, Madhuranthakan folded his legs and rested his hands upon the *peedam*, his face a picture of concentration.

“You have visited my birth-place Mazhapaadi once or twice as a child—also the Siva temple that occupies pride of place and indeed, it is of great repute for I have heard from elders that it was one of the sixty-four ancient *sivaalayams* raised by the peerless Kochenkat Chozhar. Your grandfather—my father, that is—was a man of great consequence in Mazhapaadi; our clan dated from olden times, for the Mazhavaraiyars were a hoary lineage enjoying a good deal of eminence for years, but

there had been a few missteps in the past: an alliance with the Pandiyas during the war against Vijayalaya Chozhar was an ill-formed strategy; when the latter won, Mazhavaraiyar popularity dimmed, of necessity.

“None of this concerned me as a young girl, of course; my heart had found its way to the feet of the divine Nataraja Peruman. I had had the good fortune of listening to a rather wonderful tale from a learned person in my childhood; a tale of an event that had happened, it was said, in Mazhapaadi. Once, the devout saint Sundaramurthy Naayanar was passing in its vicinity with his disciples; the shrine in his days was completely shielded by *konrai* trees; long, fragrant blooms hanging low from each branch. This probably explained Sundarar’s inability to glimpse the *sivaalayam*—but not for long; a voice, a dear voice echoed in his ears: *Forgotten me, Sundaram?*

“The saint stared here and there, and asked his disciples if they had spoken. They replied in the negative, and also divulged that their ears had discerned no sound. At once, Sundarar made enquiries about the possible existence of an *aalayam*, a shrine thereabouts—and discovered the sacred temple of Mazhapaadi, concealed amidst a welter of luxurious *konrai* trees. Ah, one can imagine his ecstasy as he glimpsed the Lord and hurried, posthaste, into the sanctum. Divine song burst from his lips; fortunate are the ears that listened for the first time to his famed verse, *Ponnaar Meniyane*, The Golden-hued One. And ever since I heard,

“Manne! Maamaniye!

Mazhapaadiyul Maanickame!

Anne unnaiyallaal

Ini yaarai ninaikkene!”

The words were etched forever in my impressionable mind.

“I began to visit the temple often, murmuring the hymn endlessly in the deity Natarajar’s presence and in due course, the magnificent God of Dance made my heart His home. I built marvelous castles in the air about my celestial Groom; I vowed that Siva Peruman and none other would be my consort. My childish heart wove endless webs of fantasy,

casting my own self as the Goddess Umai, Parvathi and Dhatchayani, all mates of the Lord and in my ignorance, I closed my eyes and resorted to penance, just as I had heard these divine entities did in a bid to join Siva Peruman in holy matrimony. Soon, I grew to loathe talk of my marriage; thus sped my girlhood.

“As a maiden, my devotion to Siva Peruman increased several-fold; my own family and neighbours considered me crazed—labelled me a *pichi*. Not that their criticisms weighed with me; apart from a few meagre hours at home for food and sleep, all my time was spent in the temple. My hands plucked the choicest flowers in the *nandhavanam* and strung them into wondrous garlands with all the power of my imagination. I derived contentment in thus decorating the lord; for the rest, I meditated for hours on end.

“It was on one such day, as I was sunk fathoms deep in prayers, eyes closed, my thoughts revolving endlessly around *Iraivan* that I suddenly heard a commotion. I swam up to awareness and opened my eyes to see five or six men some distance from me. My heart, sight and attention were captured immediately by the one in front—he seemed, to my fanciful mind, the very embodiment of illustrious Siva Peruman himself, come to claim me in company of his celestial entourage! I shot to my feet and stood in front of him, head bowed in obeisance. Tears poured from my eyes like a river overflowing its banks; they must have caught his attention.

Who is this young woman? Came a voice. *Why does she weep so?*

My daughter, I could hear my father answer. *A young woman of singular temperament; she seems to have ripened into an old, pious Siva devotee at this tender age and sits for hours in this temple, eyes closed in meditation, lost in precious pathigams or weeping like one demented!*

“When I raised my head again, common sense asserted itself; I realized that the visitor was no God but a royal. Words cannot describe my humiliation; I took to my heels and did not stop running until I reached home.

“But the one who held the reins to my destiny would not relinquish them quite so easily for he followed, in company of my father. He, my

son, was none other than my husband and your beloved father Kandaradhitha Thevar!”

The dowager queen paused for a moment, clearly overcome by the rush of old memories; her eyes glistened with unshed tears. She brushed them away gently, before continuing. “It was only much later did I manage to learn something about your father—of his recent ascent to the Chozha throne, and his frequent pilgrimages to various Siva shrines from then on. He must have been forty at that time; his consort, whom he had married at a young age, was long gone. There was no thought in his mind of a second marriage; indeed, he had taken a vow to never enter matrimony again … but his pious heart experienced a subtle change of sentiment at the sight of this naïve maiden. He wished to seek my consent in my father’s presence.

“I, for my part, was lost in a sort of strange, ecstatic trance at the thought of Siva Peruman Himself come down to earth to claim my hand; my lips conveyed my complete and utter acceptance of their own volition. Our wedding was conducted at once and as a result, your grandfather ascended to his rightful dignities again, reclaiming his glory days along with his ancient title: Mazhavaraiyar …

“Once we were joined in matrimony, we opened our hearts to each other, Child, and came to a unanimous decision: we would dedicate our lives, both of us, to the sacred duty of Siva worship; our days would be spent in contemplation of the divine and not descendants. There was an important reason for our asceticism—ah, Child, never did I imagine the day I might have to explain all this to you … but I find myself with no choice but to do so. Hark, my son and all shall be known to you soon.”

Sembian Maadevi heaved another deep sigh at the end of this considerable preamble. Madhuranthakan, his curiosity more whetted than ever, leant forward, listening for all he was worth.

•

21

“What kind of a mother are you?”

Devout Sembian Maadevi, the very embodiment of purest *sivabakthi*, compassion and grace, continued:

“Chozha *samrajyam* was writhing under the whip of grave constraint when your father Kandaradhitha Thevar ascended the throne, my son. You are aware, doubtless, of your illustrious grandfather Paranthaka Chozhar’s great prowess; in his time, the empire extended to Eezham in the south, and the river Krishna in the north—and yet, misfortune darkened his last days for both *rajyam* and royalty faced terrible woes: Rettai Mandalam forces descended on our frontiers like the proverbial *moola bala senai*, the demon hordes of Ilankai’s Ravaneswaran; Paranthaka Chakravarthy’s peerless son, warrior among warriors, a man without equal and your *periya thanthai*, Rajadithya Thevar promptly gathered forces to teach them a lesson.

“Thakkolam in the north was the site of a war the likes of which have not been seen since the legendary Kurukshethram; the number of dead rose well into hundreds of thousands and rivers of blood flooded the land. Rettai Mandalam was driven into humiliating retreat, but at a great cost: Rajadithya Thevar’s life. Your *siriya thanthai* Arinjayar was mortally wounded as well—and what was worse, nothing was known of his whereabouts at that time. His son Sundara Chozhar, however—an innocent youngster—was away in Eezham, fighting his own battles; we knew not his fate either … which meant that the only royal by Paranthaka Chakravarthy’s side in the Thanjai palace, was your father.

“He loathed wars and battles; having dedicated himself early to Siva Peruman, politics was not for him, nor the intricacies of palace intrigues and affairs of state. He mourned, often, the demons of jealousy and avarice that forced monarchs into battle and resulted in needless bloodshed. Many were the arguments he advanced in support of his views to his father and brothers; countless the days he spent in the

superior company of illustrious men who, like him, were lost in the ecstasy of devotion; endless, the months spent in holy pilgrimage and worship in ancient, sacred shrines. To even touch a sword or spear was an abomination; knowledge and expertise in the arts of war was anathema; the thrills of combat unknown and unsought. *Rajareegam* or statecraft was, in his opinion, a minefield of deceit, plots, schemes, conspiracies, counter-conspiracies, treachery, betrayal, murder and a host of other sins. *If it is a crime for men to steal*, he reasoned, *why must kings' invasions be acknowledged right and just*?

"Ah, the vagaries of fate! It was into the hands of one harbouring such sentiments that the reins to an empire passed; your father was forced to assume the weight of kingship. Appalled at the grievous perils assailing the kingdom, and deeply sorrowed at his son's death, it was but natural for Paranthaka Chakravarthy to bid your father to his side, and place upon his head this onerous task. Death would seek him out any day now, said your grandfather. *This land and its people are now your responsibility*. Unwilling to inflict further pain on one clearly about to depart this world, your father submitted to the Chakravarthy's wishes.

"Veera Narayani Devi, the gracious lady fortunate enough to have wed your father first, had reached the divine feet of Siva Peruman long before; I, on the other hand had never even met him—that momentous event would come much later—which meant that Chozha succession loomed as an insurmountable problem in your grandfather's tormented mind. What would be the *rajyam*'s fate after your father?

"This time, providence seemed to exercise munificence, for those sent in search of Sundara Chozhar in Eezham, mercifully stumbled upon him on an island, whereupon he was retrieved and returned to Thanjai. Now, Paranthaka Chakravarthy cherished a most wholesome love for this grandson, having dandled him on his knee during infancy, and showering him with a great many favours. There was another reason as well: many were the astrologers and well-wishers, great men in general, who had predicted Chozha ascendency in his capable hands.

"Naturally, such predictions fostered adoration in a heart already brimming with affection; your grandfather instructed that Sundara Chozhar be made heir presumptive when your father ascended the throne; forevermore, the crown would pass only to his sons and Chozha

Nadu would know only their rule—after which his heart knew peace; he breathed his last.

“Your father shared all the above with me, emphasizing his earnest desire to fulfill his departed father’s last wishes. I realized that it really was his dearest wish to see Sundara Chozhar and his descendants grace the throne; he would brook no opposition, nor entertain the thought of obstacles.

“Not for a moment was he subject to the lure of sovereignty; neither did he evince the slightest interest in affairs of state. His heart was pure; his intentions noble—he was a great man, indeed. His thoughts revolved, always, around the lotus feet of the magnificent Lord of Cosmic Dance, Nataraja Peruman and thus, all royal affairs and administration had been assigned to his younger brother Arinjayan and his son, Sundara Chozhar while your father immersed himself in prayer.

“As I have mentioned before, not the slightest desire for matrimony existed in his heart until I intruded in his life—naïve maiden that I was—to shake his noble resolve. And even then, it was evidence of my own devotion to Siva Peruman and the title I had earned—a *pichi*—that sparked interest in me, soon leading to great affection and as a result, marriage. And I—well, what can I say except that I must have performed a great many penances in birth after birth to have become his consort? You are immensely fortunate too, Child, to have had him as your father.”

“One may count on one’s hand the spiritually evolved saints who have actually seen God—your father was one of them, for Siva Peruman granted him a vision of Himself, appearing as *rishabaarudar*, mounted upon His Bull, and escorted him from this world. Your father perceived Paramasivan just as I see you now. Ah, is it not our sacred, absolute duty to fulfill the wishes of such an elevated soul?”

Even as the mother came to the end of her stirring, impassioned plea, her dutiful son’s slender body trembled with mingled outrage and indignation; his mind seethed with burning resentment.

“But how can that be, *Thaaye*?” Madhuranthakan burst out finally, unable to control himself any longer. “My father appraised me of nothing—why am I duty bound to lend credence to these tales?”

“Hark, my son; you were barely a toddler when your sainted father ascended to Siva Peruman’s feet; naturally, he could convey nothing of his heart’s desire to you but did so, to me. We had decided during the early days of our marriage to abstain from children—but I need not scruple to tell you that I, foolish maiden that I was, could not quite maintain my resolve. My childish devotion for Siva Peruman during girlhood had transformed after marriage, into pure, unadulterated love, *premai*, for your father. In the course of time, my exalted resolution crumbled; my wretched heart longed for a child to hold, embrace, rock in my arms, cradle in my lap and shower with fond caresses and loving touches. My body quivered and trembled; my heart burnt fiercely when I saw children nestled in the arms and laps of their mothers. What could I do but throw myself at the mercy of the gracious one who had claimed me as a maiden? The good God heeded my pitiful request; my lord, my *Iraivan* kindly granted this naïve maiden her desire—you.

“And yet, my mind was churned by unbearable turmoil. Even as I delighted, body and mind, at your birth, I dreaded your father’s displeasure–but once again, I was made to realize my great fortune for that noble soul forgave my trespasses, leaving me with a burning desire to fulfill my responsibility; my word of honour.

“For I had pledged to raise you rich in the wealth of devotion, my son—the epitome of piety; a jewel among the servants of God; a *sivabhaktha siromani* in fact and thus, with no bond to this transient, ephemeral earth. And until a while ago, I congratulated myself—dare I say, with some pride–that I had managed to carry out my duty well.

“But now—ah, my beloved, most precious one—the apple of my eye, the very centre of my universe … now, disturbing reports pierce my tranquility; my heart writhes at the hurtful words that come my way—my son, will you not dispel these wretched tales?” Sembian Maadevi pleaded. “Will you not denounce these rumours, and soothe my aching heart?”

“These rambling, roundabout speeches …” Madhuranthakan shook his head. “It’s *your* talk that wounds me, *Thaaye*; all these reports and mysterious tales that tear your tranquility—what on earth *are* they?” Abruptly, he seethed. “And what sort of promise do you expect from me?”

“No longer do you seem to possess the ability to divine my thoughts; you wish me to give form to meaning, I suppose. Very well then, listen, and I shall make myself clear: lately, I have heard that your heart has forsaken the pure, sacred Gangai of *Sivabakthi*, and floundered into the morass of monarchy. Rumours have reached me that you desire the Chozha throne—it seems to me that our foes have poisoned your sentiments. A word from you, refuting all these horrendous reports …” Sembian Maadevi paused, and cast a meaningful look at her son. “ … shall afford me a great deal of relief.”

Madhuranthakan, thus far content to be listening to this effusion from his *peedam*, now jumped up as though he could barely keep his seat; his mother rose as well, sensing his agitation.

“No *foe*, as you put it, has corrupted my pure, sensitive mind,” he flung at her. “How could those wishful of placing me on the throne be so, anyway? How could men willing and eager to give up their very lives for my sake be my enemies? No, no and no! Would you like to know the identity of my antagonist—my true *janma virodhi*, the one who has sought to undermine me all my life?” He leant towards her, lips stretched in a leer. “The one who brought me into this world—my precious, devoted, sacred mother—*you*!” His voice ended in a strangled shriek.

It was as though the dam of Madhuranthakan’s restraint had finally burst: his manners went to the winds; self-control deserted his thoughts; along with every semblance of sense and sensibility vanished the memory of Chinna Pazhuvettarayar’s sage counsel to persuade his mother with temperate and dignified arguments—only anger, white-hot and scathing, remained.

“Oh yes, you—you’re my *janma sathru*; you and no one else. You—what kind of a mother—what sort of a *woman*—are you? I’ve heard of tales and epics where mothers wore themselves out, seeking their sons’ advancement; I’ve seen women in real life throwing themselves into their son’s causes, willing to give up anything for their success but you, you who behave in every way contrary to womanhood—*are you even human*? Or a demon, perhaps, clothed in human skin? What have I ever done to you, that you must fall all over yourself to give away a *rajyam* that’s mine by rights; by all the laws of the land; by every tenet of justice? Why this terrible, overpowering need to betray me? You drone endlessly

about my father's wish; you speak soulfully of your promise to him—but where, pray, is proof of all this? You don't really expect me to believe such a farrago of nonsense, do you—because I *don't*. You claim that I've been brainwashed; I refuse to believe this as well for here's the truth—yours is the mind tainted; yours the heart poisoned; someone has committed this heinous crime and turned mother against son. Now, hear this: *never* shall I give up a throne that is mine by rights—never, not at your entreaty or at my father's command if, by some miracle, he should return to earth from the feet of Sivan.

"Hark, *Thaaye*—this, the Chozha *samrajyam* is mine; its ancient, illustrious throne, its *simmasanam* is mine and the glorious, magnificent, glittering crown, once worn by my ancestor Karikal Peruvalathan is mine too by rights—and I shall attain them all, come what may. This *rudraksha* necklace around my neck was your gift; I've worn it all these years in deference to you but now … now, I shall wrench off this evil symbol of my cowardice; this worthless chain that made me the laughing stock of the whole kingdom; you may keep it!" Having delivered a raucous, rambling speech at the height, it seemed, of madness, he tried to divest himself of the pest at his throat. Failing at this objective, he tried to rip it away with his bare hands, only succeeding in wringing his own neck; the blasted ornament stayed firmly in place.

Madhuranthakan was blessed with extraordinary good looks; it could even be said that he was a shade more attractive than Sundara Chozhar's famously handsome sons for, unlike them, his features possessed an elusive beauty; a striking loveliness usually the domain of women. But it was that face—a fascinating face with an ethereal charm—that was now rendered hideous and repulsive by resentment and burning hatred; Sembian Maadevi closed her eyes, unable to stomach the sight.

When she could finally bear to see her son again, it was in the brief silence following Madhuranthakan's thundering speech. "Child," she began, her voice a cool, flowing river of serenity, exactly the same as before. "Calm yourself; I may be every bit the demon in human skin you believe me to be —but pray, lend me your ears just a little."

"Why not," Madhuranthakan seemed to have regained his senses a little at her tone, and spoke with a creditable assumption of manners.

“Certainly—I never said I wouldn’t, did I?”

“You mentioned a mother’s temperament, a moment ago. The wickedest demon could not betray her child, for even the most dreaded carnivores try to shield their offspring from the wily attacks of predators—likewise do I seek to protect you. My express wish for you to forsake this *rajyam* has its root in another reason—one that is different from what I detailed. Your ambitions will cost you your life; which mother would not wish her son, whom she bore and raised, to live long? Heed me: this desire for the throne will make you an instant enemy of Sundara Chozhar’s sons. Aditha Karikalan and Arulmozhi Varman are warriors without equal; you, however, have had little to do with weapons. Every member of the massive Chozha *sainyam*, the armed forces, will side with the brothers, not to mention the commanders. Moreover, Sundara Chozhar’s sons possess friends in neighbouring kingdoms—but what of you? Whose alliance can you seek in a war against them? You know, as well, the presence of a *dhoomakethu* in the skies for some time now; the world can attest to the truth of grave calamity to royalty, for such is the nature of a comet. And I —well, why would a mother’s heart not quail at the thought of such danger to her own? Is it a crime, Child, to be anxious about my only son’s fate—can it be betrayal when I wish only for his safety and health?”

That Madhuranthakan was visibly moved by these heartfelt words was apparent; his bubbling anger seemed to subside, somewhat; his cold, hardened heart thawed, and warmed. “Forgive me Mother, but if these be your concerns—had you but given me just a hint—why, I could’ve allayed your alarms in a moment! I’m not exactly an orphan, Amma, bereft of allies; all of Chozha Nadu—its renowned chieftains, famed lords, and respected *peruntharam* officials—approves my claim. The Pazhuvettarayars stand staunch by my side; Kadambur’s Sambuvaraiyar enthusiastically espouses my cause, not to mention your brother and my uncle, Mazhavaraiyar. If these glorious names will not satisfy you, I can offer those of Neela Thangaraiyar; Irattaikudai Rajaliyaar and Kundrathur Perunkizhaar who have all sworn fealty to me and promise their considerable hordes, as and when the occasion demands—”

“I have no faith in these exalted pledges, my son, for these very men swore eternal fealty to Sundara Chozhar and his descendants too, once.

And should they, in some farfetched eventuality, keep to their promises and stay by your side—what of it? Are you unaware of their pitiful numbers; their meagre armies? The Northern Forces answer to Aditha Karikalan while the Southern lie under the command of Kodumbalur Velaar."

"The kings ranged on my side are capable of mustering ten thousand men each at a moment's notice, *Thaaye*."

"Armies aside, what of the citizens? You cannot be unaware of the enormous popularity of Sundara Chozhar's sons; the people's devotion for them is unsurpassed—proof of which you saw yourself, today. Had it been Arulmozhi Varman or Aditha Karikalan entering Pazhaiyarai—ah, can you imagine the surging hordes that would have turned out in welcome? And so it would have been in your case, once, for you were loved too—but peoples' sentiments have changed ever since you clasped hands with the Pazhuvettarayars; I believe you have earned every citizen's hatred ..."

"I care not a whit for Chozha citizens, *Thaaye*, for I fail to see how their devotion can be any use to me. The people are of no account; they're pathetic subjects, fit only to be ruled. Their duty is to swear unconditional loyalty to those gracing the illustrious Chozha throne—"

"I lament the fact that those who twisted your thoughts have not sought to acquaint you with even the foundation of monarchy; the most basic rule of rule: no leader can sustain kingship without his people's endorsement and allegiance; such a rule cannot prosper!"

Commotion broke out somewhere in front, at the palace entrance even as the dowager, wise in her years, spoke—an uproar that seemed to contain mingled, unanimous cries of anguish, anger, concern and curses from a thousand human throats strangled by overwhelming emotion, like the furious, thundering roar of an ocean tormented by a gale.

"Grievous peril approaches the Chozha *samrajyam*, my son—this is its first indication," murmured Sembian Maadevi. "I shall go to the gates and divine the reason for this pandemonium myself; meanwhile, stay here," warned the anxious mother.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Periya Thanthai; Siriya Thanthai

Father’s older brother and father’s younger brother, respectively.

22
“What’s that sound?”

Each step towards the pretty little stream clarified his mind’s glowing picture; each glimpse brought a fresh burst of delighted awareness—for the princess, the *arasilankumari* seated most gracefully in the boat was none other than Kundhavai herself—not that Vandhiyathevan had ever entertained a single moment of doubt. Heart’s desire to behold his dream at close quarters aside, Azhwarkkadiyaan had paused near the banks and Vandhiyathevan stopped as well, hesitation dogging his steps.

“Why do you lag, *Appane*?” Nambi demanded with well-simulated astonishment. “Ilaiya Piratti awaits—indeed, she’s been waiting a long time now, so make sure you deliver good tidings first: that the prince has arrived and is safe; don’t lose your head and valuable time in regaling her with your much-vaunted valorous exploits! And now, I’d better return: we’ve released the very fiend of fiery riots in Pazhaiyarai; I ought to lift a finger at least to stuff it back into its cage. One can only try, I suppose,” Azhwarkkadiyaan heaved a deep, much put-upon sigh as he made his swift way back. “Ah, you and your daredevilry—witness the trouble it’s heaped upon all our heads!”

Vandhiyathevan stared after him, eyes wide with astonishment. How, *how* on earth did this short, stocky man manage to be aware of everything? This, despite not having asked the younger man a single question. Was he a master of deduction—or did he really know? A tried and tested phrase swam into his mind then, of supposedly two kinds of vagabonds: One, the proud descendant of a line of privileged, permanent tramps; the other, a pitiful soul forced to assume, through the vagaries of fate, the trappings of a tramp. Perhaps the same distinction applied to spies as well: *Circumstances forced me into this role which is probably why I’m subject to so many embarrassing episodes while this Vaishnavite, from a long lineage of devoted spies goes about his duties with superb nonchalance! Such casual demeanour and lack of excitement characterizes Azhwarkkadiyaan—but I still don’t know his*

master. Is every detail he revealed about himself true? Has he been honest indeed?

Vandhiyathevan strolled towards the banks, mulling over his erstwhile guide, when he raised his eyes. The princess, seated in the boat, came into his line of sight—and all thoughts of an obdurate Nambi fled. So did memories of his recent mission; the information treasured in the recesses of his mind—everything, everything slithered into nothingness; Vandhiyathevan forgot the purpose of his assignation; the world and even his own existence.

Aha, this young lady's lovely countenance never receded from my heart for even a moment—her divine face has accompanied me through dreamscape and reality; through searing gales, dense forests, steep mountains and even the high seas … but how marvelous that she appears a thousand times lovelier in person! What's this lump that chokes my throat—why does my heart flutter so?

Without exactly being aware of his actions, Vandhiyathevan sloshed a few feet into the stream and climbed into the boat, lost in pleasant reverie. The princess made a sign to the boatman who began to pull his oars strongly. The little craft swung into the waters; Vallavarayan's heart swayed as well, to its own beautiful rhythm.

"Well, *Nimithakkaaraa*? Are your services to be commandeered only by princes? Or would you unbend towards me as well? How do you interpret signs, I wonder? The planets and stars reveal their secrets for your eyes only, I presume—or is it crows and sparrows you seek? Palmistry could be your trade … or, no, I'm mistaken: undoubtedly you seek fortunes in your client's face—else why would you stare so, at mine? Heed my warning: such behaviour towards high-born ladies can never answer; they would withdraw their patronage at once!"

Her voice pealed in his delighted ears like a particularly musical bell and he thrilled, despite himself. "On the contrary, *Ammani*; my stare was not with the intention of prediction but rather, in the vain effort to prod my memory: I seem to have seen you somewhere, at some time …"

"Ah yes, so forgetful as you are! I'm not exactly unaware of your propensity for amnesia—let me assist your efforts: you saw me for the

first time approximately forty days ago, at the home of Kudandhai's astrologer and later again that very day, upon the banks of Arisilaaru."

"Stop—pray, cease, *Ammani*—for I certainly won't believe these falsehoods. To say that I set eyes upon you for the first time such a short time ago—ah, how could you? *How could you indeed*? Was it only forty days? Wasn't it forty thousand years ago? Have I not known you for eons—a hundred thousand times in an hundred births before now? Haven't my eyes been blessed with the sight of your divine form at the foot of hills? Upon the summit of soaring peaks? On the shores of misty mountain springs?

"Have I not saved you from the terrifying claws of a dreaded tiger as you tore through dense jungle? I struck that evil predator with a single blow of my trusty spear, didn't I? For I was a hunter of some prowess, then; trapping beautiful parrots with jewel-toned wings in my net for your edification—but you gathered those pretty birds in your arms, set them free and watched them flutter into the sky with a merry tinkling laugh!

"Another time, another birth and I was a *valaignan*, a fisherman; my boat sailed across rivers and lakes far, far away, luring beautiful fishes—fishes of emerald, silver and gold, dazzling in the sun—and I lay them all at your feet. You, however, flung the glittering creatures back into the waters; their spirited swim towards freedom afforded you much delight.

"I was a diver too, once—plunging deep into the very lap of the oceans, breath held moment after painful moment—gathering priceless pearls and costly corals to gladden your heart, but you, ah! You plunged your hands, your slender delicate hands into those peerless gems; called every urchin, boy and girl from the village—and draped their little arms with those precious deep-sea treasures!

"Then, hark—there was the time I plucked a rare fruit that grows only once in thirty years, upon a three hundred year old *Ilandhai* tree, and offered it for your delectation but you promptly fed it to your pet, a beautiful *naaganavaai* bird; you watched it peck and devour the *Ilandhai* fruit with immense satisfaction.

"Do you, perhaps, recall when I journeyed to Devalokham, the abode of the Gods, once? I gathered celestial flowers, divine *Manthaara*,

Paarijatha blooms and showered them at your feet; you took one look at them—ah, your disdainful remarks I well remember: *What price these petty flowers; how could they compare to the fragrant Mullai blossoms upon our backyard fence?*

"On one occasion, I procured Devendran's most treasured possession, his unrivalled *rathina haaram*, a necklace set with matchless precious gems—but the very sight offended your righteous eyes: *How dare you imagine that I'd touch a trinket belonging to a depraved, immoral being?* You asked, and I was left speechless.

"Another time I ascended to the snowy peaks of the very Kailasam, where I sat in penance before Devi Parvathi who took pity on me, and granted one of her priceless *silambu* ornaments; it was my earnest desire to set this peerless prize upon your feet—but you shrank back, horrified: *Ayyayo*, you screamed, *the divine ornament from Devi Jaganmatha's golden feet upon mortal flesh? How could I? How could* ***you****? Return this at once!*

"And then, ah …! The time I went on a triumphant march around the world, conquering all sixty-four kingdoms; I confiscated and offered you their glittering, marvelously wrought crowns—but you wouldn't deign to touch them; if anything, your dainty feet kicked them away but even then, all I could think of was your pain: *Ah, wouldn't they prick your delicate skin*? Is not this the simple truth, your highness—weren't these what really happened? Or did we, as you calmly inform me, meet for the first time only forty days ago?"

Vandhiyathevan paused to draw breath after this truly mind-boggling effusion but even as Kundhavai watched him, wide-eyed, he launched into the next, unwilling to relinquish his stage, heaven-sent, as it were. "Now I remember another wondrous occasion, *Devi*: once we sat in a dazzling silver boat, took hold of ivory oars bound with gold and glided upon waves of pearly moonbeams upon the heavenly skies—"

"*Ayyayo*—this soothsayer seems to be in the grip of madness!" The princess assumed a look of mingled severity and apprehension, glancing about her. "Good God, I ought to ask the boatman to turn around and take me to shore—"

“Pray don’t, *Devi*; there’s no need for such a drastic … my wits were in my possession until the moment I arrived upon these banks or I couldn’t have fashioned an outrageous ruse to enter Pazhaiyarai, could I? How else could I have announced myself as a *nimithakkaaran* to Madhuranthaka Thevar; convinced him about my identity and joined his entourage to enter the palace? Or fooled the physician’s son and escaped his wily clutches? My faculties were functioning fair, your highness, until I glimpsed your divine countenance upon this boat—and I lost myself as one intoxicated!” Vandhiyathevan finished, magniloquently.

“Well, if that be case …! Do make a monumental effort and avert your face from mine; gaze at the serene, tranquil waters of this very stream; rest your restless eyes upon the skies blue; those massive trees upon the shore that pierce the very heavens; the palace’s ornate balconies; marbled steps leading to the landing stage …if those aren’t to your taste, why not the pretty *aambal* and *sengazhuneer* flowers crowding upon the water—or even the blessedly blank face of this phenomenally deaf boatman … and let me know how you fared; tell me if your mission ripened or met a bitter, unpalatable end. Did you manage to escort the prince here—how does he do, now? Safe? Where has he been quartered? Who are his present companions—kindly acquaint me with all these details. And then,” concluded Ilaiya Piratti. “Then only may you launch into your adventures from the moment you left this city.”

“Had I not been successful in the mission with which you tasked me, *Devi*,” Vandhiyathevan interjected with alacrity. “I couldn’t have borne to show my face here, or even enter your presence. In answer to your queries—first, yes, I’ve indeed brought the prince from Ilankai—a hundred perils intervened; a thousand more hindered but I circumvented all … still, I regret that I can’t guarantee his health. The dreaded ague had claimed him when I left him—but I can allay your concern about his companions: the boat-girl Poonguzhali and Sendhan Amudhan, who gathers flowers for worship. They, your highness, are loyal subjects, willing to sacrifice themselves a hundred thousand times if that would ensure the prince’s safety,” Vandhiyathevan assured.

A sound rose at that moment—a sorrowing lament, a chorus of grief, with confusion and terror competing for supremacy. Warrior and princess turned and peered in the direction of the commotion, anxiety and fear clearly mirrored in each other’s faces.

“What on earth is that—that sound?” Kundhavai’s voice quivered, finally. “The roar of a mob—a furious, wrathful mob—”

“So it would seem,” murmured Vandhiyathevan in agreement.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

When describing Vandhiyathevan’s thoughts on Azhwarkkadiyaan, the phrase Kalki uses is this: ***“****Parambarai aandi; panjathukku aandi****.”***An *aandi* is a nebulous term used to describe anyone from a hermit to a beggarly lout: basically, these are men who have renounced the Householder’s Way and wander from place to place, subsisting on the general population’s charity, often receiving food, clothing and shelter as a result of grants and donations by temples, religious institutions and (in those days) royalty. A *parambarai aandi* is someone who has lived off society for generations; *panjathukku aandi* refers to a man who’s forced to resort to this existence due to an upheaval or some grievous calamity (as the phrase implies, famine/loss of livelihood/scarcity of income). Applied to everyday situations, the phrase means that the first named is a professional; the second, an amateur.

23
Vanathi

Were bards, those masters of verse asked to give poetic form to Kodumbalur's princess, those sensitive souls would have likened that gentle maiden's beauty to the peaceful glow of fading twilight.

For—is it not true that a delicate shroud of nameless sorrow envelopes us as day deepens into night? But such mellow grief is also accompanied by an inexplicable, serene contentment. Darkness sweeps in as every last ray of the sun dies a long, lingering death, but one need never mourn the passing of the light—for a swift raising of eyes, a look at the velvety night sky and the heart leaps from despair to delight: ah, witness Vaanamaadevi, Queen of the Heavens, light hundreds and thousands of glittering, twinkling lamps within moments! And unlike the sun's scorching brilliance, their light does not blind the eyes; one may gaze at them to satiation and when the moon rises—well! Words fail at such loveliness for the world thrills to cool, pearly beams drenching the earth; heart and mind quiver with exquisite ecstasy. It may be true that the lotus furls at dusk, but is it not equally true that fragrant jasmine buds burst into bloom as though competing with stars in the sky—and does not the exquisite scent enrich earth and the heavens, sending both into dizzying intoxication?

The incessant, melodious call of birds, their *kuthukalathdvani* might cease at nightfall … but how utterly delightful—how soothing the musical *naathaswaram* and gloriously pealing bells of the *semakkalam* from yonder shrine, the *devaalayam*? How enchanting the divine notes from the *veenai* and *yazh* played by slender fingers upon ornate balconies in stately homes?

Thus indeed, was Vanathi's beauty: shades of sorrow and the sheen of serene delight mingling beyond recognition into one delicately beautiful form and true to it was her character: a character of two distinct, diverse facets.

One moment would find her drooping, the very definition of grieving Chandramathi and Saavithri—mythological heroines who suffered such terrible fates; another would see her bursting with vitality, full of songs and dances that brought Arambai and Urvasi to mind—surely those celestial maidens spent their days thus in Devendran's court, in a sort of divine ecstasy.

Kovalan's lover Madhavi at one time—the soul of happiness, the beloved of her heart's dearest; if there were a way to shape endless joy into human form, it would be Vanathi … then would come a time when she would wilt, the very picture of grief, as though Kannaki—that ill-starred, desperate wife of Kovalan, who never knew a day's happiness.

Valli, consumed by sweet, despairing love on some days—the tribal woman hopelessly enamoured of Vadivelan Himself, delightful of face and form and the favoured deity of the Tamil people. On others—the daughter of Devendran, Lord of the Gods, fortunate Deivaanai who found herself the consort of that selfsame Vadivelan, also known as Karthikeyan; ah, how her home Devalokham celebrated her wedding! This too was Vanathi, her entire self a ripple of happiness, her feet not staying a moment on the ground, skipping a dance of delight.

Days would pass altogether when not a trace of laughter could be found on her face—but suddenly would dawn days too, when mirth was never far from her eyes; her lips. She transformed, then, into a merry maiden full of an ecstasy that transcended mortal bounds: peals of laughter; deep, joyous chuckles and pretty trills of amusement radiated from her in a hundred thousand gloriously dazzling particles of light, touching everyone and everything; atoms of pure, unadulterated bliss that swept out in a wave intoxicating the very universe.

There must be reason for such disparity in her character; such curiously dissimilar traits that made her seem almost two different women—reasons that might be traced to the circumstances of her birth and childhood, for delight and despair seemed to have moulded her in the very womb. Kodumbalur Siriya Velaar wrought the fate of Chozha Nadu during those years, facing merciless enemies in war after war; reports would arrive one after the other—the first delivering glad tidings while the next brought deep, soul-shaking terror. Not unnaturally, Vanathi's mother endured pregnancy in two very conflicting states,

experiencing relief and happiness one moment; heart-wrenching sorrow the next.

She survived a bare few months after birth; Vanathi's father it was who raised his baby daughter for she had rapidly become the apple of his eye—but the young girl was doomed, it seemed, to misfortune for this happy state of affairs did not last long: not even for the sake of his beloved daughter could Siriya Velaar, that warrior among warriors, stay within the confines of his palace; soon, he marched to Eezham at the head of a vast armed force in pursuit of Veera Pandiyan's Ilankai allies. In pursuit of him went Death; Kodumbalur Siriya Velaar was mourned and honoured as *Eezhathuppatta Siriya Velaar*; He Who Embraced Death in Eezham, upon its bloodied battlefields.

For a while after this catastrophic event, Vanathi's life was marred by unalloyed grief; a sorrow that cannot be understood by any but daughters raised by fathers. Not all the luxurious comforts of the Kodumbalur palace could replace the vast emptiness left behind by her father, and though many were the consoling reassurances to the frightened, lonely little girl, one left a lasting mark on her impressionable heart: "Grieve not, Child, for soon, your father shall return to you; in your womb and as your own son—a warrior who shall stun the world with his valour!"

The benediction took root in her very soul, soon branching into elaborate, delightful fantasies; grief and mental fatigue were now being strenuously replaced by fantastic castles in the air of her imaginary son—and it must be said that her valiant efforts at crossing the yawning chasm of her father's death were reasonably successful.

Day after day was spent in pleasant, rose-tinged dreams about this child of hers: what would he look like? How would he act; what feats of bravery would he accomplish? She spent hours painting, painstakingly, his charming, distinguished features; bringing to life, in her mind, his personality and achievements. Her *manorajyams* were all uniformly centered on this unknown, unseen boy; she saw, with her powerful mind's eye, this courageous son's journey to far off lands, conquering marvelous kingdoms; in her colourful fancy, he returned to her with the speed of the very wind and dedicated every symbol of his humongous victory at her feet. She witnessed, with vivid imagination, his coronation;

his seat upon the throne, a crown gracing his noble brow; row upon row of monarchs supplicating themselves at his feet, paying him extravagant homage. She hovered beside him, unseen, as he appeared to his people, watching all of Chozha Nadu rise and roar with passion—the churning, choppy seas at the sight of a luminous, lustrous moon; she wandered upon the coast, watching him depart the shores in an hundred ships, all overflowing with warriors; she peered at the strange, alien lands he invaded, her soul thrilling as he planted the flag of victory in the midst of newly conquered kingdoms; last of all but certainly not the least, she saw him, her splendid, magnificent, illustrious, loyal son, her boy, her child come to her often, and utter heartwarming words: *You and you alone, are the reason for my every success, dear Mother.*

And Vanathi, that naïve, young maiden would sometimes caress her stomach, flat and supple as a banyan leaf—wondering if, perhaps, her imaginary prince was already within. Every citizen of the ancient Tamil land had heard glorious tales from the Mahabharatham—especially of Kunthi Devi's almost supernatural pregnancies; Vanathi too, had pondered endlessly about the deity that might eventually grace her with child. Which One would take pity on her? Which dazzling God might descend to earth with the express purpose of presenting a boy?

Youth and inexperience had kept her unaware of the role of marriage in pregnancy—a state of affairs that naturally did not last long. Over the years, her understanding of the world increased. Realization set in that a husband was absolutely necessary; only through him could she could beget a son. This, though startling, was still an abstract concept; it was doubtful if she entertained fantasies about her partner in matrimony.

Her somewhat staid, placid life and thought processes underwent a sea-change upon arrival at the Pazhaiyarai palace. Kundhavai Devi's friendship was a revelation; if her gracious demeanour and undeniable majesty delighted and soothed the timid, rather fragile maiden, the princess's dazzlingly fashionable attire, the poise and assurance that categorized her very mien not to mention her sharp intellect, soon ushered Vanathi into a truly fascinating new world—but these were not all.

Other princesses from various clans were also resident in Pazhaiyarai and they, she soon realized, were inclined to resent her.

That she possessed a certain something, some unique quality that provoked their jealousy was a fact her instinct did not fail to point out. Not that she lost her head; hers was a character defined by innate goodness and this, combined with natural civility prompted her to be on her best behavior. She was courteous, sociable and content—but not content enough that she stopped indulging in fantasies of her inimitable, imaginary son.

It was sometime during these months that she first glimpsed Ponniyin Selvar.

And her precious castles in the air, her marvelous fantasies, her splendid dreams—every one of them came crashing down, crumbling into a million pieces.

She might be aware of a husband's necessity for children but thus far, her thoughts had not lingered upon a particular mate; it did not seem very important, to tell the truth. She was rather inclined to be dismissive about the man who might claim her, someday—but ah, this wretched, wicked heart! This depraved mind that must needs torment her peaceful, contented life—for what must it do but lose itself to the adored son of Chozha Nadu, the prince most beloved of his people?

Despair twisted painful, hopeless tendrils around her; wasn't he the most sought after among royals; didn't the kings of fifty-six *rajyams* fall all over themselves to secure him for their own, extremely eligible daughters? To expect a prince of that stature to so much as glance in Vanathi's direction—ah, *dare* she? And then, imagining herself bound in wedlock to such greatness—sacrilege!

As for entertaining the idea of marriage to another—perish the thought. Her naïve maiden's heart was now irrevocably his; there could be no question of … but oh, what of her wonderful daydreams—her, precious, precious son? Her brave, courageous boy—would he never appear? Was it all to be *nothing*?

Her heart broke as she realized the futility of her pathetic hopes; Vanathi's spirits sank. She was, once again, as she had been before—the very image of deep, unrelenting sorrow.

It did not take long for Ilaiya Piratti to divine the true state of affairs, but her demeanour towards Vanathi was unchanged—if anything, she was more sympathetic than ever. Every speech, every gesture was infused with affection and distinguished attention; she tried to raise the girl's spirits as much as she could. To lose her heart to Ponniyin Selvar was not as catastrophic as Vanathi had imagined, she indicated subtly; a happy conclusion was not outside the realm of possibility. She escorted her wilting companion to Kudanthai in a bid to reinforce her point.

Vanathi's heart leapt at the astrologer's magniloquent prophecies about the son she would bear; her misery evaporated, paving the way once more for marvelous *manorajyams* that expanded every waking moment. Desolation and delight assaulted her by rapid turns; if the misery prompted by extreme anguish was unbearable, so was the exhilaration borne of joy—and when both overwhelmed her, she fainted. It was this, nature's kind cure of unconsciousness that helped her survive; thus Vanathi managed to hold on to some semblance of sanity.

There was, however, more in store for her: the dramatic performance in Thanjai, based on Paranthaka Chakravarthy's life; the mournful lament she heard that very night and the terrifying spectacle that followed were fuel to the fire of inner tumult. The impact of the raging feud between the clans Kodumbalur and Pazhuvoor was borne in on her forcefully; the true extent of the latter's influence in Chozha Nadu was made equally obvious, that day.

Would the Pazhuvettarayars, rulers-in-lieu of the king as it were, allow the fulfillment of her *manoradham*? And even if some superior intervention of fate should let them sanction her marriage to Arulmozhi Varmar, what about their women? The Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani—ah, her authority and power were legendary; what of *her* sentiments?

The image of a beautiful cobra rose in Vanathi's mind at the very memory of Nandhini; innocent as she was, the latter's seething resentment towards Ilaiya Piratti had not escaped her. Wouldn't such festering hatred target her as well? Why, such a vicious cobra might sink her poisonous fangs into Ponniyin Selvar himself!

That shrouded figure parading at midnight in front of the Chakravarthy as he lay on his sickbed—didn't it possess a remarkable

similarity to Nandhini? *Had* it in fact, been her? Why had the Emperor lamented so, in such a sorrowful voice? *Why doesn't Ilaiya Piratti raise the subject with me? Indeed, her sentiments have undergone a change as well; no more does she communicate as she used to, once. Gone are those carefree, delightful conversations; she's lost in her own thoughts these days and prefers time alone. There's no doubt that she's tormented by some deep, crushing anxiety—perhaps it's to do with Ponniyin Selvar? Is that why she won't talk about it—does she wish to spare me?*

She's disappeared today as well. Ah, the antics of these young women the moment her back is turned! Their silly pranks; the fun, the frolic and insane, idiotic amusements! Not a moment's anxiety do they endure, these madcap maidens; their enjoyment shan't suffer no matter what.

Never had Vanathi been able to stomach their ridiculous, childish ways—but two or three days of continuous, crass, superfluous speeches had been more than she could bear, lost as she was in her own particular brand of misery. No more of this, she decided, and set off, trying to trace Ilaiya Piratti's whereabouts.

Intelligence was soon forthcoming: the dowager queen was presiding over an assemblage; it seemed the princess was attending. Vanathi duly hurried over but found, to her disappointment, that court had dispersed. Further enquiries elicited details about a confidential meeting consisting of only the dowager and her beloved son, Madhuranthakar. Without precisely knowing why, Vanathi found her heart sinking at this piece of news; she left again, her path taking her this time to the vicinity of the palace entrance. The loud roar of a confused mob smote her ears; she paused, puzzled. None of this made sense. Desperation seized her once again: she must, *must* seek Ilaiya Piratti; it seemed imperative, somehow.

Vanathi stopped every palace servant along the way, asking for information, finally receiving what she sought: Kundhavai had had a long, private conversation with the Vaishnavite Azhwarkkadiyaan, before leaving for the stream flowing alongside the palace gardens. Even as Vanathi hesitated, wondering if she could pursue—aware that Ilaiya

Piratti no longer relished interruptions during such occasions—she espied someone running towards her. A maiden, by name Varini.

“The prince—” she gasped. “Ponniyin Selvar has drowned at sea!” Having delivered this horrendous news, she burst into tearful howls. The rest of the young women, gathering with pricked ears, promptly lapsed into horrified wails and sobs.

Vanathi stood as though turned to stone—for a moment, nothing seemed to penetrate her heart. The others slowly turned their attention to the speechless young woman, scrutinizing her expressionless face.

Every outraged eye appeared to bristle with indignation at her paralyzed state: *You wretch*, they seemed to shriek. *You—your misfortune has caused this terrible calamity! You are the reason for the prince’s death!*

It was too much—she couldn’t—couldn’t bear these silent accusations; these terrible, wrathful reproaches. Vanathi could not stand—she certainly could not stay another moment amongst these pitiless women; abruptly, she turned and flew along the path to the palace stream.

Her heart raced even as she hurried along the corridors and into the garden; for the first time since she heard those terrible words—“*The prince has drowned at sea!*”—their import made sense; their meaning crashed into her startled, petrified mind—but then, something else drowned out the shock.

For some time, now, the prince’s face had appeared whenever she happened to look upon water, she remembered. She could divine that dear, handsome countenance whenever she peered at the surface from the banks, those utterly perfect features—that vanished when she tried to touch. Now—only now did she realize its enormous significance.

He must have been thinking of me at sea, she decided, heart thudding with the realization. *At the moment of drowning—I must have been in his thoughts; he’d probably called for me while I—ah, wretched, unfeeling dolt that I am, stayed upon the banks as though watching a*

play! Foolish, stupid girl—ah, what have I done? But there's no point in worrying over the past; the question is—what do I do now?

The answer came to her the next moment.

Naïve little fool, you, she told herself, a wry smile on her lips. *Isn't it obvious? The stream hugging the palace gardens joins the Arisilaaru, which flows straight to the sea. The sea, Vanathi—where the prince, your prince waits—waits for you underneath the waves in a magnificent palace of pearls and corals, nestled in the deep—what's keeping you here? Why must you tarry a moment—what else have you to do but rush to meet him?*

The seething, churning torment vanished as she made this decision; her heart calmed; all traces of anguish disappeared and her mind sank into such tranquility that she walked without a tremor, to the banks of the stream.

Slowly, almost tenderly stepped her feet upon the marbled steps to the water; she glanced around—*ah, there's a boat and Ilaiya Piratti it is, within. And the man—who might he be? The youngster who forced his way into Kudanthai astrologer's home and later carried the princess's olai to Ilankai; likely, he'd been the bearer of this terrible news. Perhaps this was why my mentor took him aside—to learn what she could; she's left me behind to spare me the agony …*

If she saw me and turned around the boat—ah, I could never carry out my intentions; she'd try to offer poor consolation; empty words to calm my nerves—she'd never let me join the prince. And yet—and yet—would it be right to leave without a word? Without a last, final farewell, a sign even—? So kind a princess too, to this pitiful orphan—wouldn't a thanks be due – no, no, I cannot wait; not a moment more—there, I see his face; his beloved countenance full of light and love—I see him well, now—ah, that charming smile—he's calling out to me—there's his kind, gentle voice—"Nothing can separate us now," he says. "Every barrier to our wedding has crumbled to dust—come!"—why wait? Why do I hesitate?—ah, my head spins—I'm dizzy—good God, am I about to faint again, here and now? No—wait, it hardly matters as long as I don't fall upon the banks but into the water—please …

Vanathi's *manoradham* was granted as it so happened; she did crumple gracefully into the stream and her scorching body cooled gently, as did her burning heart.

Down, down, down, down she went, sinking into the depths for what seemed like eons; she knew not how far or how long she had descended for it seemed like a few moments and yet like endlessly stretching *yugams*.

And indeed, here she is, now—at the splendidly magnificent world spread out at the bottom of the sea—perhaps this was the famed *Nagalokham*, Abode of the Snake-people—ah, their mansions; floor upon superb floor rising into the sea—*I cannot even see the top of the spires—they're so tall! Even the light seems cooler here, gentler—I wonder why? Perhaps it's the water; the unimaginable depth turns even light to a soothing presence—but where does it come from? From the very walls of these palaces, I should imagine and no surprise, for they seem moulded out of gold, pearls, diamonds and priceless gems found upon the heads of snakes, their very sirorathnams—is it any surprise that even the mansions shine with such a cool, unearthly light?*

Wait, those people in the distance—who are they? How their forms glow; how radiant their faces! They do resemble celestial beings, don't they—perhaps I'm mistaken in thinking this Nagalokham; surely this is the abode of the Devas?

And then, quite suddenly, events occurred swiftly, like a dream within an already glorious dream: the beings escorted Vanathi to a splendidly decorated *mandapam* in the centre of which waited Ponniyin Selvar himself, a golden smile of welcome transforming his luminous features into one of celestial beauty.

Amidst the exquisite melody of heavenly musical instruments; the divine notes of the *dhunthubi*; the shower of fragrant flowers and glitter of precious gems; the thrill of auspicious, godly chants and glorious, heartfelt blessings, the prince and Vanathi garlanded each other and thus sealed the bonds of holy matrimony. Naturally, such thrilling ecstasy was too much for her fragile sensibilities; she fainted once again.

After what seemed like an endless passage of time lost in the pitch black of unconsciousness, two hands raised and cradled her gently; *Ponniyin Selvar's blessed arms*, Vanathi imagined at first; *he must have placed me upon his lap to bring me around*, she thought, with a touch of mingled embarrassment and pleasure. But wait—were those bangles she felt? Confusion laced her garbled thoughts. And then—

"Vanathi—oh, my dear, what have you done? Vanathi!" *That voice is feminine too.*

With all the strength she could muster—and that was not much—she opened her eyes just a sliver, to see Kundhavai's compassionate face bending over hers.

"I don't remember seeing you, *Akka* …" murmured her pale, trembling lips. "Were you at my wedding?"

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Chandramathi

The much put-upon, sorrowing wife of Harichandra, the celebrated king who would not lie. This may have been much to his credit but his poor consort, confronted with a husband staunch in upholding his virtues, gave up her queenly status; was forced to a life of privation and later into slavery, losing her son in the process. Chandramathi was often held up as the womanly ideal of a wife who would undergo any hardship by her husband's side—but her life was one unending river of deep, wrenching grief.

Saavithri

Legendary wife to Sathyavaan, she followed her husband into death and literally dragged him back to life, defeating the God of Death Himself. This conferred upon her the title of a pure, devoted *pathini*, the perfect wife, but Saavithri's life was one of adversity: despite having been born a princess, she embraced life in the jungle—for service to her husband and his parents, was enough to ensure the heavenly abode. However, that she was also miserable and suffered a great deal is obvious, as Kalki equated her with Chandramathi.

Kunthi Devi's Marvelously Magical Motherhood

Kuru prince Pandu's royal consort, Kunthi Devi led an unenviable existence as the wife of a man who could never have children. But fate, in its mercy, had already offered solution to a complication that would only crop up much later in her life: as a princess in her adopted father's home, Kunthi was once asked to serve the famously wrathful sage Durvaasar. Her dedication

pleased him into offering her a boon: a *mandhiram* that would, upon recitation, instantly bring forth a God who would, equally instantaneously, give her a child. Kunthi, in her innocence, tried it out at once, with the result that Surya the Sun God appeared; Karnan was born, only to be abandoned. Years later, Kunthi used her *mandhiram* again—this time with good effect—to beget Yudhishtran, Bheeman and Arjunan. Obviously, this is the basis for Vanathi's yearning: she's unaware of any aspect of reproduction and cherishes a simple belief that beseeching a God would grant a marvelous child.

24
Return to Consciousness

Vanathi fainted again; her eyes closed gently. Consciousness returned by slow degrees; so did memory, and along with it realization that her wedding to the prince in *Nagalokham* or *Devalokham* was just an elaborate hallucination. The terrifying news about his drowning—Vanathi's frantic run towards the banks—the vertigo which tumbled her into the stream—she remembered it all.

Disappointment shook her at the recollection; despair so sharp and intense that she felt her heart seize as though she had taken a spear to her breast.

She tried to pry her eyes open, but in vain; they would not even flutter. Her rescuer—who could it have been? Ilaiya Piratti, of a certainty; Kundhavai Devi had been in a boat upon the stream, after all. The question was: why? *Couldn't she have let me drown; lost to the waters? I'm going to quarrel with her when I can open my eyes and gather strength to speak: Why did you save me? Is this all the love you bear your beloved brother …?*

But hark; she speaks, now—but what, and to whom? I may as well listen.

" … she's lost her senses; babbling—ah, a miracle that she's survived! If the boat had even been a little away—we couldn't have seen her fall, could we? The very thought makes me quail—"

"—or we'd have been rendering thanks for *not seeing it*, which would've been a blessing in disguise; this young lady's life would have ended peacefully. But she's alive now, and one cannot but wonder at the Kodumbalur princess's future sufferings, thanks to your interference—"

Why, who is it that talks of me with such empathy—ah, yes, that young man; the one I'd seen in the astrologer's home, and upon the banks of Arisilaaru! He must have been the one to bring news of the

prince as well —and what're they going to say? Listen, Vanathi—your eyes may not open, but there's nothing wrong with your ears, after all.

"These cruel, cruel words without a hint of compassion—how *could* you?" came Ilaiya Piratti's startled voice. "Or is this perhaps true of men —are they all malicious and heartless?"

"What've I said, pray, that marks my heart as stone?"

"What of your wish, just now, that death would be a better fate for this young woman? Isn't that proof of your heartlessness, if proof indeed was required? If you only had some inkling of my extraordinary efforts to nurture her—"

"Your pardon, *Ammani*, but did you even listen to her insane rambling?"

"What did you discern?"

"Something about wedding the prince …"

"Indeed—heart's craving finds a way to her lips even when she's unconscious; so deeply has that desire taken root in her."

"A desire that will bode her no good; that road will lead to nothing but endless despair and disappointment."

"What—why would you even say such a thing? Who else could be a fitting bride, pray than this highborn maiden? Surely you must know the illustrious, ancient Kodumbalur clan's valourous lineage—"

"I'm not exactly unaware of their prominence, true—but we're talking at cross-purposes, here. This young lady's phenomenal pedigree may be unmatched, but who cares? Her ambitions are in vain for they can never find fulfillment …"

"Certainly they shall, for they're not hers alone but mine too—my *manoradham* and my decision, in truth."

"Not even your determination can accomplish the impossible—especially in this case."

“There you go again, prophesying disaster which is futile, I think, considering you’ve just revealed the prince’s safe residence in Naagai’s Choodamani Viharam.”

Oh, joy—what wondrous, delightful news! Is the prince safe indeed, in Naagaippattinam? Ah, fortunate are my ears to have heard this—and happy, happy chance that my fall into the stream didn’t end in death! I’m alive now, thanks to Ilaiya Piratti and here’s another monumental debt, as though I’m not beholden to her in a thousand other ways … but wait—what? Ayyo—what on earth’s this young man saying? The words fall on my ears like burning drops of hot, scorching lead!

“His safety is assured, *Ammani*—but not so, this young woman’s aspirations …” There was a pause. “I believe it unlikely that the prince will ever marry her.”

“Believe what you will but if there was ever a man in this world to obey my every word; to carry out my slightest wish and not cross a line of my drawing, that’s my young brother, Arulmozhi Varman.”

“There’s another such, your highness—I speak of myself.”

“Well, then, what more could I ask for, pray, and why must I—or even you, for that matter—conjure obstacles that don’t exist? Would the Pazhuvettarayars prove a hindrance to even these ambitions—?”

“That I cannot take it upon to answer, but while the prince’s affection and loyalty to you is absolute—and it’s true that he’ll fulfill any demand of yours; he did refuse the very crown of Ilankai in obedience to your single word in front of my very eyes for he detests the idea of rule, but even this he would undertake, should you so wish; every one of your commands he shall accept—except when it’s a question of marriage to this young woman …”

“You believe he’d refuse, do you? And what fault does he perceive in my beloved, precious companion, to justify rejection—what blemish do *you* see?”

“None, *Ammani*, and I wouldn’t believe it if I did, for even a maidservant, the lowest *chedippen* in Ilaiya Piratti’s palace would still

appear a celestial nymph to me; a bounding rabbit in Kundhavai Devi's garden would seem more splendid than Devendran's divine mount, the Iravatham. The prince's sentiments are the same; nothing mars his perception of this lady—but consider, if you please, another possibility; the possibility of his having lost himself to another—"

Ayyo—such cruel words! Vanathi's heart lurched. *Why does this young man pierce my wounded heart with these venomous barbs?*

"I can't pretend to understand you, venerable Vaanar warrior—but I do wish to know the reason for this unwarranted insult."

"Neither unwarranted nor an insult, *Ammani* but the plain truth, based on what I've seen and heard with my own eyes and ears."

"Continue; I'm willing to listen, no matter how debilitating the news."

"Well … you remember, I don't doubt, my mentioning Poonguzhali; the girl who ferried me to Ilankai. Aside from saving the prince from the sea, she's conveying him to Choodamani Viharam in her own boat, for I wouldn't dare leave him with Sendhan Amudhan alone. No, it was Poonguzhali I trusted, and to whose deep, devoted care I consigned his highness, for I know that she'd sacrifice a thousand lives if she could, in his service—"

"And well she may, but a boat-girl is still just a boat-girl, isn't she? To cherish dreams of marrying a monarch who may one day rule the world—good God, the mind boggles at the idea of a petty sparrow, hopping on the ground, daring to snare an eagle soaring in the high heavens."

"Beg pardon, but why not? There's no law that forbids a small bird from craning at its king; nor an eagle from wishing to peer down at a sparrow."

"Trust me to rout out such ridiculous yearnings, if some such do exist in my brother's mind—no, not upon my life, by all I hold sacred! Not for nothing have I guarded Arulmozhi Varman from grave dangers and grievous perils far, far worse; the wily net of an *odakkaari*, a boat-girl, shall not defeat me. I can and will release him from *this* snare as well—"

“And is an *odakkaari*, as you term her, so pitiful an object, to be swept away like rubbish? Caste and clan are of such great import, are they? The blood runs red in a boat-girl’s veins as well; her heart throbs with the same yearnings as that of a princess born and raised in a palace. In fact, now that I think of it, a royal’s affection is unlikely to be pure and unadulterated; ambition and the desire to rule may well poison her love—but an *odakkaari’s* heart is without blemish or scruple; a sentiment that’s shared by the prince, to be honest. That being the case, I don’t see why the objections of others must prove a hindrance. For instance, consider my own, ahem, case, gracious highness; if I could just break open my heart and show you what’s inside—”

“I pray you do nothing of the kind. It’s best if what’s in your heart just stays there. The things you speak of—love, desire, yearning—may well be the domain of ordinary men, but the rules are different for royals: they must and shall wed others of their own station. Their hearts cannot stray; such wayward emotions may lead to untoward complications—an example of which exists in my own family: in his youth, my father—with no expectation of kingship, you understand—consorted with a forest-girl and … but I’ve no need to share matters outside the realm of our conversation, have I? As for this young woman—her eyelids flutter; she’s about to regain consciousness. Now, is there nothing else you wish to tell me? What about the many perils you underwent in Eezham—couldn’t you reveal the details?”

“Indeed I can, your highness, for one occurred the very night the prince refused the throne of Ilankai. We were walking along the streets of Anuradhapuram when the front of a building caved almost on our heads—a moment’s hesitation and we’d have been buried alive. The reason we didn’t was a woman who stood on the opposite side of the street, and signalled to the prince—”

“Good God, a woman your saviour again—who was she?”

“I know not her identity, but I couldn’t say the same of the prince; he seemed to know her—oh, heavens, pray don’t entertain the wildest notions, *Ammani*; her years are many—”

“How old would you say she was?”

“Old enough to be his highness’s mother. She’s deaf, besides, and mute—”

“Wait—what was that? What did you say?”

“A deaf and mute woman, advanced in years—more than forty-five, at any rate.”

“And—you did indeed see such a woman in Eezham, *Ayya*? Pray tell me more: is there nothing you know of her antecedents? Her place of birth, for instance—”

“That I do: an island off the coast of Ilankai.”

“*Ayya*!” Kundhavai’s agitation was palpable now, finding expression in her breathless voice. “Go on—tell me more: her appearance—what was she like?”

“To tell the truth, *Ammani*, I’m rather reluctant to disclose a certain oddity in her features—truly amazing to me, you understand—”

“Then hesitate no more; go ahead, I tell you!”

“Her resemblance to a woman I’d seen in Chozha Nadu stunned me; the only difference I could perceive was her age for she was older, and wore no ornaments or ornate dress. Her hair was left loose, but her face—ah! Her figure and features were so exactly the same that even I was taken in, for a moment.”

“And she whom this older woman resembled; could you …” Kundhavai paused. “Could you reveal her identity?”

“I don’t think I need to, your highness, for you may well guess.”

“Are you referring to me? This young woman Vanathi, perhaps? Or the royal mothers in Thanjavur’s palaces?”

“None of them, I’m afraid.”

“Nandhini—Pazhuvoor’s Ilaiya Rani?”

“The same.”

“Dear God—my suspicions have been proven right, then!”

“What were those, pray?”

“That a woman I detested, abhorred and denounced as worse than a poisonous cobra might be my *thamakkai*, my elder sister—and I realize from your statements that I might well be right. Ah, the cruel vagaries of fate … which actually bear out my sentiments about royal marriages: one can never be too careful about clan and caste, you see.”

“I, on the other hand, am no nameless orphan devoid of a lineage, *Ammani*, for my forebears ruled divine Tamil land for over three hundred years; they threw Chera, Chozha and Pandiya monarchs into prison and as for me—well, I may not hold their massive kingdom but my hands possess a trusty sword; my shoulders, sheer strength and my heart, a wealth of courage—”

“Details of your possessions must wait for another time, *Ayya*; rest assured I shall lend my ears then, but there are other things that clamour for my attention now—and your assistance would be welcome, I admit. Would you oblige?”

“Had I a thousand lives, all shall be sacrificed at thy divine feet, *Devi*.”

“A worthy sibling to that boat-girl, I see … but enough of this talk: our young woman is about to open her eyes.”

Vanathi had indeed, regained complete consciousness and with it, a spurt of newfound, rejuvenating energy. Wondrous and varied ideas chased around in her head; there were things that needed to be done; that had to be proven—first and foremost, that her love was in no way less than a simple boat-girl’s; surely Vanathi ought to retain life until at least that was established? It was decided, then: no more thoughts of giving up life. And then, the Chakravarthy’s mournful lament she’d heard that night, in the Thanjai palace, not to mention the strange sights she’d glimpsed—those began to make some sort of sense as well.

“Dearest,” crooned Ilaiya Piratti, once Vanathi had finally opened her eyes. “How do you feel, now?” Her voice revealed a wealth of affection.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, *Akka*. I’m fine,” came the serene answer. “Except for being sorry that I’ve caused you so much trouble.”

“I’m afraid I’m sorry as well, for much the same reason,” intervened Azhwarkkadiyaan’s voice; the man himself appeared in a moment. “Pandemonium reigns at the palace gates, *Devi*; people and panic have overthrown normal life. Every Chozha citizen is grieving and furious at the prince’s drowning. Your presence is required to soothe their overwrought state,” he petitioned. “Else, there will be disaster and matters may soon be beyond anyone’s control.”

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25
Enter, the Mudhanmandhiri

The streets of Pazhaiyarai were erupting in pandemonium on a scale never witnessed, thus far.

Citizens thronged in unruly, raucous mobs towards the sector housing royal palaces, the *rajamaaligais* of that ancient city: men, women, young, old and children swept along in loud, excitable groups; Saivites, Vaishnavites, Buddhists and Jains blended seamlessly; even Kaalaamukars, austere hermits known for severe ascetic regimen, could be found dotting the crushing crowds. Many were sobbing and weeping with unimaginable grief; most felt no compunction in cursing the Pazhuvettarayars, giving full rein to tongues suddenly loosened by shock.

Here and there marched zealous young men, staffs in hand; they tapped each other's weapons occasionally, prompting remark: "A knock on the Pazhuvettarayars," some murmured, while others did not care to be so quiet—and these numbered a few Kaalaamukars, as well.

The facades of Pazhaiyarai's royal palaces were arranged, aesthetically, in a curved crescent; a vast moon-courtyard spread in front, common to all residences, capable of accommodating many thousands in case of festive or other, extraordinary circumstances. A high, massive *madhil* surrounded this *muttram*, or courtyard. At each of its three entrances stood palace guards, on sentry duty.

The surging crowds began to congregate in the vicinity of these gates; within moments, the mob had grown to overwhelming proportions, swelling with every second. The messengers bearing the paralyzing news, along with their city escorts were the only ones allowed entry; the rest were barred—but not for long.

Cries erupted from the heaving crowds—where, exactly, it was not possible to discover—cries that ripped through: "Get in; get in!" Have you

seen sea-waves, burgeoning one after the other and finally crashing upon the shore in one colossal surge? It was the same with this ocean of humanity.

The front line of people, pushed forward by the seething mass at the back broke through the guards, spilled in—and that was it! Just as a tiny crack is enough for the heaving Kaveri to break its banks, this frothing mob too broke ranks and thundered into the moon-courtyard which filled in seconds; now, thousands jostled for space in front of the palaces.

It was this—the terrifying tumult of an overwhelming crowd—that assaulted Sembian Maadevi's ears as she was engaged with Madhuranthakan. Curtailing argument with her son at once, she made her way to the palace's upper balcony and thereon, to the frontage. The crowd, roaring and stamping, caught sight of the aged queen's serene countenance touched by divinity; her superbly dignified mien as she stood erect, hands folded—and calmed down almost at once. Silence reigned for a few moments.

It broke soon, courtesy a few bold voices. "*Thaaye*, where is our prince?" they demanded. "Where is Ponniyin Selvan? Where is the apple of our eyes, our heart's beloved—where is Arulmozhi Varmar?" This was the signal for the mob to shriek and roar more furiously than ever.

The dowager queen paused upon the gallery, perplexed, only dimly aware that Chozha Nadu's precious prince and keeper of his people's hearts, Ponniyin Selvan, had met with some grievous peril—but what sort and how, she knew not. Good God—surely, surely the Pazhuvettarayars had not deployed some dangerous, devious plot, and thus heaped irreparable blame upon the Chozha dynasty and Madhuranthakan?

The envoys seized this moment to push and jostle through the crowds, arriving at the forefront. "*Perumaatti*, most gracious lady," began one of the city escorts."Here are messengers from Thanjavur bearing important tidings …" his voice trailed away.

Sembian Maadevi raised a hand, quieting the murmuring crowd. "What news, good men?"

“Hardly that, *Thaaye*—rather, the most unfortunate beings alive for we bring grievous news: Prince Arulmozhi Varmar was travelling aboard a ship from Ilankai to Kodikkarai in obedience to the Chakravarthy’s command; the vessel was caught in a terrible whirlwind; its companion disintegrated, and sank. His highness jumped into the sea to save survivors, but never returned. Arrangements for a stringent search and rescue have been made all along the coast; the Chakravarthy and her majesty, Malayaman’s daughter are lost in sorrow. Furthermore, I have orders from the Emperor as well: your gracious self, Madhuranthaka Thevar and Ilaiya Piratti are asked to Thanjai as soon as maybe possible —”

These words fell upon the collective ears of the crowd just as they did upon Sembian Maadevi’s; her eyes, usually filled with the tranquility of devotion, now brimmed with tears that rolled down her cheeks; the crowd burst into horrified, mournful wails at the sight.

“Never, never must you go to Thanjai, *Thaaye*,” shrieked someone along the frontlines. “Neither should Ilaiya Piratti—no, it is the Chakravarthy who ought to be brought here!”

“It is false—all a dupe that Ponniyin Selvar drowned at sea—the Pazhuvettarayars must have murdered him!” shouted a second.

“Madhuranthakar must not go either,” yelled a third. “He ought to remain in Pazhaiyarai!”

“Where is Ilaiya Piratti?” rose a loud, collective shout. “Where is she? We wish to see her!”

Sembian Maadevi turned to an attendant by her side, and bid her fetch the princess at once.

Azhwarkkadiyaan, mingling with the maddened crowd below, now chose to leave, hurrying along alleys to the lane he had entered before—the arbour where Kundhavai Devi was still engaged in reviving Vanathi. His arrival coincided with Ilaiya Piratti’s last words to Vandhiyathevan, upon which he informed them about the uproar in the palace courtyard.

Kundhavai's mind was made up an instant; relinquishing Vanathi's *saithyobachaaram* to the maids hovering nearby, she hurried to heed her call.

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The first to meet her startled eyes as she stepped upon the palace gallery and headed to its forefront, was Sembian Maadevi's grief-stricken face—and the tears rolling down her cheeks, unchecked. The sight was enough to unnerve even her iron composure; sympathetic tears gathered in Kundhavai's eyes as well—and the crowd, observing the two emotional women, sank in a sea of sorrow.

"Ponniyin Selvar did not drown—this is all a Pazhuvettarayar plot; they have murdered him—revenge! We want revenge!"

"The Chakravarthy has been imprisoned by them—he ought to be released and brought here, to safety! Command us, *Devi*, and we shall march at once!"

Outraged shouts; impassioned pleas; the emotional onslaught from below smote Ilaiya Piratti relentlessly—but not for nothing was she a princess of the realm.

Kundhavai's mind raced: briefly, she considered the possibility of revealing the prince's safe existence, only to discard it at once; now was not the time to make public such cataclysmic news. And yet, this multitude had to be appeased; their lacerated emotions soothed, but how …? And then, an idea occurred to her.

In a gesture that exemplified her spirit, she brushed away her tears determinedly and peered below to gaze at the people at the forefront: ah! Azhwarkkadiyaan and Vandhiyathevan had arrived. She signed to the Vaishnavite to come up and he swiftly obeyed; she murmured a few words into his ears.

Azhwarkkadiyaan turned to the crowd, stretching out his hands to soothe the clamouring, restless masses. Then, he began in stentorian tones: "Her highness Ilaiya Piratti cannot find it in her heart either, to believe in the prince's death; just as Mother Kaveri saved him from a

watery grave in childhood, so too would Samudhra Rajan, Lord of the Seas, have stepped in to retrieve his beloved Ponni's son. Her belief is supported by the wise *nimithakkaaran* as well. And now, she wishes you to disperse home, good people, secure in the knowledge that she will do all in her power to discover the prince's whereabouts!"

A long, loud exhale—almost as of relief—seemed to sweep through the gathering.

"The *nimithakkaaran*—where is he?" demanded a man. "We would like to hear the good news from him, ourselves."

This, Vandhiyathevan judged, was the right moment to make his entrance; he jumped up from his place and sprinted towards the upper galleries, coming to a stop by Azhwarkkadiyaan. "While it's true that grave peril threatens the prince, there's no serious hazard to his life; it wouldn't be so easy to put a period to his existence," intoned the 'soothsayer,' in a reassuring, booming voice. "He shall be found soon!"

"How would *you* know?" demanded a voice.

"I read the signs, the stars and planets; I can divine meaning in the movement of celestial bodies—and I predicted the prince's fate from such portents."

"Lies—they're all lies! You're no *nimithakkaaran*—liar! You're a spy!" shrieked the same voice.

Vandhiyathevan peered down at the perpetrator of these outrageous claims—of course, the physician's son. "Little fool," he mocked gently. "Labelling me a spy? Well, whose, then?"

"The Pazhuvettarayars!" Pinakapani's answer was swift.

A growl escaped Vandhiyathevan. "*What* did you say?"

The gallery he leant over was fully twelve feet above the moon-courtyard brimming with people—but Vallavarayan cared not for such paltry considerations; he leapt upon the smirking Vaidhyar's son.

Furious battle broke out between them and needless to say, the jostling crowd parted at once around them, leaving a circular space—for has there ever been anyone at anytime, not desirous of watching combat in front of their eyes? The enthusiastic melee continued vigorously, watched with considerable anxiety by those on the balcony. As for the rest of the gathering, with most unaware of exactly what was happening, shouts and screams rose; confused, unintelligible babble ensued.

The long, authoritative blast of a conch and horns cut through the pandemonium.

“Make way—Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddha Brahmaraayar arrives,” cried a thunderous voice. “Make way!”

And way was made automatically by that massive, unruly, excitable crowd—for Chozha Nadu’s esteemed Chief Minister.

26
Aniruddhar‘s Appeal

The richly decorated palanquin, bearing its precious burden the Brahmaraayar, cleaved neatly through the jostling crowds in the *nila-muttram*, the moon-courtyard. The people parted way, paying obeisance to the approaching chief minister; some made bold to reveal their concern for the prince—a concern seemingly shared by the Mudhanmandhiri, whose countenance looked haggard. For all his strain, though, he did not fail to offer what solace he could to the miserable public, raising hands in benediction and compassion.

Once at the palace entrance, the palanquin was lowered to the ground in front of the elaborate façade; the chief minister emerged, gazed above and upon glimpsing the dowager queen and princess in the gallery, paid his respects. Then, his attention swerved to the furious skirmish unfolding nearby.

Indeed, Vandhiyathevan and Pinakapani had been locked in nothing short of mortal combat, unaware of—and unwilling to notice—anything around them.

Azhwarkkadiyaan, who had returned to earth by this time, calmly approached the Mudhanmandhiri and murmured something into his ears, whereupon the great man turned to his attendants: “Arrest these ruffians who are so discourteous as to brawl in the palace courtyard!”

His men plowed through the restless crowd at once under the aegis of Azhwarkkadiyaan, promptly separating the disheveled combatants and wrestling their arms behind their backs. Vandhiyathevan, about to struggle in protest, quieted at a subtle, yet unmistakable sign from the Vaishnavite.

Aniruddhar ascended to the *mael maadam*, the upper gallery, where he addressed the gathering: “I cannot but be aware of your anxiety and concern, good people; know that your grief is shared by the

Chakravarthy and his queens, who are lost in a sea of sorrow at this calamity—I must beg you, citizens of Chozha Nadu, to desist from engaging in any activity that might increase their present agitation. Rest assured that every possible effort is being taken to search for, and rescue the prince; now disperse to your respective homes, please."

"We wish to see the Emperor!" shouted a man in the audience. "The Chakravarthy must return to Pazhaiyarai!"

"What of our soldiers in Ilankai?" demanded another.

"The Chakravarthy's safety is assured in Thanjai; his palace-in-residence is guarded night and day by the faithful Velakkara Regiment. I pledge that very soon the Emperor shall arrive here, under my personal escort. As for Eezham, worry not: the war there has finally ended; victory is completely, irrevocably ours. Our soldiers, your men will soon return home!"

Impossible to describe the explosion of merriment in the crowd! Delighted laughter and applause erupted at these announcements and the good subjects of Chozha Nadu duly went the way they came, heaping liberal praises upon Sundara Chozhar and Anbil Aniruddhar.

This restive assemblage now dissolved, the Mudhanmandhiri addressed the dowager queen. "I crave an urgent audience with you, *Devi*, upon a matter of great import; shall we proceed within the palace?" Then he turned to the princess. "I shall visit you later, *Amma*."

Kundhavai returned, obligingly, to her residence—but not without a rush of debilitating nervousness. In general a most indomitable young woman, there was yet an iron will in the Chozha *samrajyam* that unnerved even her; if there was anyone she feared, it was this, the Mudhanmandhiri, who missed nothing. His were extraordinarily powerful senses; his eagle eyes could gauge not just a person's exterior but penetrate their very hearts, divining and absorbing every secret. Confusion clouded Ilaiya Piratti's thoughts: how much did he know, or didn't know? How much could she tell—or keep from him?

His peremptory command to arrest both Vandhiyathevan and Pinakapani in the same breath had been infuriating; the princess had

had to employ a great deal of restraint to suppress her feelings—it would not do to reveal her sentiments in public; leaping to Vandhiyathevan's defense in front of an audience was impossible. *Visit me later, will he? I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget*, she fumed as she swept away to her *anthappuram*.

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As a personage synonymous with piety and by virtue of her rank, Sembian Maadevi commanded the devotion and reverence of every Chozha citizen; Aniruddha Brahmaraayar was no exception—for all that, however, Periya Piratti seemed in the grip of a nervous dread at this juncture, even taking her seat only after the minister had done so.

"*Ayya*," she began, voice revealing the strain. "Disaster and catastrophe seem to have joined hands in raining bolts of thunder upon my head for a while, now. Is your news to be the same? Or have you come with words of ease?"

"I regret that I cannot answer your question, *Ammani*; that would depend a great deal on your reception of my report." The minister's answer was, as usual, in keeping with his reputation as a master strategist.

"The news about Ponniyin Selvan—is it indeed true, *Ayya*? I cannot bear to believe—ah, do you remember the hopes and dreams we cherished of Arulmozhi Varman? The many, many conversations we had of his wondrous destiny; the whole world at his feet and he, its undisputed emperor …"

"While it is true that you made some such statements—predictions by astrologers, I was given to understand—*adiyaen*, this servant, has neither concurred with them nor differed, *Perumaatti*."

"Be that as it may, tell me this: is it certain that Ponniyin Selvan has been claimed by Samudhra Rajan?"

"As to that, *Thaaye*, who may be assured of such an event? What *is* certain, however, is that such a news has, ah, taken the entire *rajyam* by storm—"

“And if it indeed be true, what of Chozha Nadu’s fate? What calamities might not blight this land?”

“It seems to me that calamities are not about to wait for confirmation of reports being bruited abroad—”

“Indeed, you speak the truth; baseless rumours are foundation enough for catastrophe. Witness the eruption today; never, in all my life have I seen the people of Pazhaiyarai roused to such fury—barging into the palace precincts—”

“Behaviour not restricted to Pazhaiyarai. Thanjai too, has seen its fair share of upheaval; the Velakkara Regiment has refused to budge from the palace. The populace broke through sentry points and surged around the Pazhuvettarayar residences; we had to send crazed elephants among the crowds to disperse the swarm—”

“*Ayyo*—dreadful—what terrifying tidings!”

“A good thing, under the circumstances, that Madhuranthakar arrived here; horrendous blame would have attached to him otherwise …”

“The mystifying changes in him would surprise you, *Ayya*—”

“Not at all, *Thaaye*; some inkling of them I have had, in recent times.”

“An inkling which did not prompt you into bringing him to his senses—but you could aid me now: counsel me as to how I may change his sentiments.”

“Unnecessary, *Amma*, in my humble opinion. Madhuranthakar’s ambitions need not be thwarted; if anything, you perceive in me a supporter of his cause—”

“A—? I am afraid I cannot divine your meaning, *Ayya*.”

“It is Madhuranthakar’s considered opinion that the Chozha *singaadhanam*, the royal throne, is his by right; that he ought to succeed the Chakravarthy at the end of his reign, and rule this *rajyam*. A worthy

aspiration—one that has taken deep root in his heart as well. I see no advantage to crushing these desires; nor would the kingdom prosper. Far better to give in to them …"

"*Ayyo*, what sort of speech is this? Is it indeed you—daring to consider betraying the Chakravarthy? Ah, what perilous times I live in!"

"Not by deed or word have I entertained treachery to my liege, *Perumaatti*. Rather, his is the command that sends me here; his, the petition I am about to lay before you: Madhuranthakar wishes to ascend the throne at the end of the Chakravarthy's reign, and the Pazhuvettarayars have conspired towards this cause. Far from forfeiting his claim, however, the Emperor wishes to crown your son heir, and relieve himself of royal duties—which explains the reason for my visit, here and now. Sundara Chozhar begs your consent to this scheme."

"He may design a great many wondrous schemes—but to signify my support is impossible, for never shall I set the seal of approval on a decision that goes against my sainted husband's wishes. Hark, oh minister, you who have plumbed the depths of the sea of knowledge! Regardless of the Chakravarthy's own wishes, I marvel at your audacity in broaching this subject to me; how could you? Have you forgotten, *Ayya*, the secrets—privy to only you and me—pertaining to the Chozha succession—"

"I forget nothing, *Ammani*; there are even secrets I know of which you are ignorant, if I may say so—for which reason I am here, as the Chakravarthy's envoy."

"Your remarkable intellect, wit and phenomenal royal strategies are renowned, *Ayya*—but pray do not seek to display them to me, a woman."

"Far be it from me to enter into argument with your noble self, *Perumaatti*; neither have I arrived to plume the extent of my much-vaunted knowledge. No, my only desire, nay, humble hope is to plead my case with you—to save Chozha Nadu from unimaginable, grievous peril. To appeal, to pray, indeed, for resolution—"

"A prayer that is best laid at the divine feet of the Lord Who Bears the Crescent—or perhaps your patron deity, Vishnu Murthy—"

“Indeed, *Thaaye*, in the event of your disapproval, your condemnation, I shall have no choice but to appeal to *Ambalathan*, the Lord of Dance, and *Arangathan*, Who Resides in Arangam—and only They may save this land.”

“These remarkably roundabout speeches—! Indeed, I do not understand what peril could possibly lay siege to this *rajyam*—and if so, how could Madhuranthakan’s accession prevent destruction?”

“Hark, gracious lady. Today’s incident is no random occurrence; just as the citizens of Pazhaiyarai rose up in fury, so too shall those from Kanchipuram to Rameswaram within two or three days, and their wrath shall be a sight to behold. That will not be all: reports have reached me of Boodhi Vikrama Kesari marching at the head of a massive army from Ilankai; I expect a similar one any moment of Aditha Karikalan commanding the vast Northern Chozha Forces towards Thanjai—he shall not hesitate when he hears all. As for the Pazhuvettarayars, they and other chieftains are already amassing forces and soon, cousin shall behead cousin in a bloody, gory massacre rivalling the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas. Your family; your people, your flesh and blood will destroy each other; obliterate this dynasty and finally annihilate this very land. Tell me, my lady; is this what you wish? To stand witness to a bloodbath?”

“Most noble minister, Abode of all Knowledge—I have no relations; no kith and kin and certainly no flesh and blood that may lay claim on me. You must, I am sure, have heard of the illustrious saint Adhi Sankarar, who descended to earth in the west, the *malainadu*, and here are his words:

“Matha sa Parvathi Devi

Pitha Devo Maheswara

Baandhavaa: sivabakthaascha …”

And in keeping with this glorious verse, the divine Devi Parvathi is my mother and my father; Paramasivan and aside from his devotees, fellow Saivites, I have none to claim as mine—”

“And yet, *Ammani*, I beg you focus your attention towards the last line of that same *slokam*, composed by that selfsame Adhi Sankarar: ***“Swadheso bhuvanathraya …”*** or in other words, the land of our birth is as the three worlds to us—not that I need explain this to you. And would you really watch your own country burn as a result of internecine conflict?”

“The land of my birth is indeed dear to me as the three worlds, as you so rightly point out—but is it only Chozha Nadu, *Ayya*? This strip of land the length of my hand? Not at all; it extends up to Kailaiyangiri, the celestial abode of Siva Peruman in the north. Should I find myself without place here, I shall journey to that most holy of sites, the Kasi Kshethram; then to Kashmir and Kailasam. The idea of such a pilgrimage has obsessed me for a while now and I must beg your assistance—”

“Like you, I have no compunction in admitting that our blessed lands stretch from Thirikona Malai in the south to the very Himothgiri in the north—our *swadhesam*, the land that is truly ours—but this divine, ancient country now finds itself the focus of unimaginable peril. Dangerous men of treacherous clans seek to destroy us—*Pattaaniyar*; *Thurukkar*; *Mogalaayar* and *Araabiyar*—these and many more have been eyeing us lustfully, slavering at the mouth to conquer us; these hordes have been seeking fresh lands, new countries to enslave and now, they seem to have centered their ambition on us. History repeats itself; what the Romans and Hunas attempted a thousand years ago—what they hungered for then—will be sought again by these men of a new faith; they have amassed ravenous armies that march upon our borders even as we speak. The tenets of their religion are peculiar indeed, for they exhort followers to demolish temples and smash our deities; this, they teach, will shower upon them the greatest virtue. There is no king, no ruler in the North who can withstand such a heinous attack, *Ammani*. And I—well, I must admit that this servant cherished splendid dreams once—a fantastic, marvellous dream in which Chozha warriors marched to the Ganges and even beyond, to the great Himalayas and established a magnificent *samrajyam*, vanquishing demon hordes that aim to ruin temples. It now rests upon you to fulfill these aspirations, to transform these dreams to reality. Support Madhuranthakar’s claim; approve his ascension to the throne, and save Chozha Nadu from the horror of a cousins’ war!”

Sembian Maadevi preserved her silence for a few moments, lost in thought. “*Ayya*,” she said, finally. “This impassioned plea, and your emotional words—they have shaken my naïve heart, for what am I but an ignorant woman? Should such a grievous peril as the one you outlined indeed threaten our blessed Bharatham, then to Sarveswaran, the Lord of us all falls the responsibility of protecting it surely and not me, a petty, helpless female? Forgive me, but I can never ignore the last wishes of my husband on his deathbed; neither can I renege on the pledge I made to him,” she finished, staunchly.

“In that case, *Ammani*,” Aniruddhar sighed. “The time has come for me to reveal a secret unknown to you, thus far—”

Madhuranthakan practically exploded into the chambers at this opportune moment, and the minister’s words were lost. “*Amma*, what’s this I hear?” demanded Sembian Maadevi’s son, impatient, agitated. “Has the sea claimed Arulmozhi Varman? Truly?”

The Mudhanmandhiri rose at once, bringing the audience to a close. “You may as well offer your son what solace you can, *Perumaatti*; I shall have to reserve my information for later.”

Madhuranthakan watched as the older man crossed the threshold. “That man, stalking through these corridors …” he muttered, his handsome features twisting into a sneer. “ …is my first foe, my *sathru*.” He turned to his mother. “So, he’s been poisoning your mind in my very presence, has he?”

The prince’s words could not fail to fall on Aniruddhar’s sharp ears.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Pattaaniyar; Thurukkar; Mogalaayar; Araabiyar

While the story is about the Chozhas and revolves almost entirely around Chozha Nadu, Kalki the historian also ensures that we, as readers, are aware of the bigger world. This is the 10th century after all, and India was facing some of its biggest threats from outside; the Afghans were beginning to make concerted attacks on the northwestern front; North India was being

annihilated with the Rajputs offering valiant but sporadic resistance. Here, Aniruddhar is being specific when he mentions four sets of invaders, suitably Tamilised:

Pattaaniyar: Pathans

Thurukkar: Turks

Mogalaayar: Mughals

Araabiyar: Arabs

27
Kundhavai‘s Astonishment

Upon the Mudhanmandhiri’s entrance into Kundhavai’s residence, the princess rose and folded her hands in reverence.

“May you wed a husband of courage and character, *Amma*, and live long,” Aniruddhar uttered a benediction.

“A blessing such as this, *Ayya*?” Kundhavai raised an eyebrow. “And at such a moment too—”

“What else may an old man offer, *Amma*? But what kind of blessing would please you, pray?”

“We’re anxious, every one of us, about the illustrious Chakravarthy’s health. Not to mention Arulmozhi Varman’s fate—indeed, the entire country is lost in sorrow—”

“An emotion that seems to have escaped you, *Thaaye*, for I see not a single mark of grief blight your divine countenance.”

“A woman born into the valorous Maravar clan shall not give way to distress. Must I flail at the first sign of trouble, weeping and wailing—?”

“On the contrary; I shall merely beg the gracious princess to kindly console such weak, cowardly souls such as myself.”

“Console you, Acharya? The one person possessed of an iron heart; of steely determination that shall not stumble should even the whole world overturn?”

“And yet, my dear, yet … you manage to shake even such a stoic soul, don’t you? Women of the *anthappuram*, born to royal privilege, ought to spend their days delighting in song and dance, but you chose to walk a different road—and witness the catastrophe you have wrought, meddling in royal affairs.”

"*Ayyo*, what terrible accusation is this? What meddling have I done—what catastrophe have I wrought?"

"My instructions to Arulmozhi Varman were to remain in Ilankai for a while—and yet, you sent an *olai* in direct contradiction, urging him to leave at once. Now who, I ask, is about to lend an ear to an old man in opposition to *your* summons? The result of your impetuous action is clear for all to see: Samudhra Rajan has ripped Chozha Nadu's beloved son from his loving mother's arms. You could not have failed to witness the veritable ocean of people surging into the courtyard, screaming themselves hoarse with anguish? I may as well inform you that the whole country is subject to unimaginable distress—and are you not the cause, *Thaaye*?"

"But—why cast me in the role of a villainess? Why argue that mine was the *olai* that forced him to leave Ilankai? I assume you are aware of the two war ships choking with soldiers, sent by the Pazhuvettarayars to imprison the prince—"

"Your assumption is correct, *Amma*; I am not exactly unaware of that fact—but therein lies your ignorance: the Pazhuvettarayars would then have been solely held responsible for the disaster that befell Ponniyin Selvan. The two vessels under their authority have been wrecked, however—and should they argue, now, that the prince left Ilankai in obedience to your summons … what of *your* rebuttal?"

"This *olai* of mine that you harp on, *Ayya*—how do you know of it? Or even the Pazhuvettarayars, for that matter?"

"How do *I* know—good lord, *Amma*, ask the whole world, rather! For there is not a soul unaware of its existence. Your precious envoy was first captured by our men in Ilankai and so, his presence and possessions became public knowledge to everyone upon that island. As for this country, credit for that must rest with the physician's son who accompanied him until Kodikkarai. Witness the public revelation of your private, confidential commission! This, *Amma*, is why our wise elders ruled that women are not to interfere in affairs of state."

Kundhavai stood as though turned to stone, too stunned to even speak—but it is doubtful if she would have even if she could, for there

was no defence she could advance. The Mudhanmandhiri had successfully argued her into a corner—and if she could admit it to herself, there was much in his statements. The moment she came to this realization, a spurt of fury bubbled up against the Vaanar warrior. Ah, here was no dearth of courage; he could be relied upon to produce fantastic feats indeed but to expose himself thus—to make a secret mission so public! He ought to be chastised well, the next time she saw him … at which thought she remembered that he had been imprisoned by order of the Chief Minister. Ah, what desperate webs of disaster had he woven around himself, ensnaring her as well! Couldn't he manage to keep himself safe for even a moment? Must he walk into such mad, insanely dangerous traps? Must he give credence to every ridiculous remark of the physician's son and launch himself off the balcony in retaliation? And then engage in a public brawl, of all things?

"I must beg to petition you, *Ayya*," she said finally, gathering her wits and courage, somewhat. "Just one boon. And you must, in your benevolence, grant me this."

"Command me rather, *Devi*—for there is none in this *rajyam* who may refuse your slightest desire."

"Two men were … were engaged in combat when you arrived at the palace entrance, and you gave orders for their arrest."

"Certainly I did, for their crime was heinous indeed. How dared they descend to such a disrespectful act in the very presence of the dowager queen? And in such a situation—amidst a mob in great distress, ripe for pandemonium! What calamity might not have occurred; what catastrophe might not have befallen if the mass, ignorant of the cause of their quarrel, had decided to close in? Would not confusion and chaos have overtaken the entire kingdom, just as a tiny spark blazes into an inferno, engulfing an entire forest?"

"Indeed, *Ayya*, they were in the wrong and I seek not to excuse their conduct. But I ask—plead if I must, the cause of one among the two; I beg the release of one of the combatants."

"If I may know the identity of the man fortunate enough to have claimed the princess's benevolence—"

“My envoy to Ilankai.”

“Ah, the fruit has slipped into milk, as the saying goes.”

“Has it indeed? But—why do you say so?”

“It was my intention to arrest the messenger myself—and here he is, snared all by himself. An easy catch, I must say.”

“But why? What’s his crime?”

“A grave, most grave—nay, monstrous accusation hangs upon his head.”

“Indeed? What might that be?”

“That his is the hand that pushed Ponniyin Selvan into the sea, thus killing the prince.”

“Good God—atrocious! And who is it that dares accuse him thus?”

“Not one, but many. Parthibendran, who took the prince aboard his own ship, certainly does; the Pazhuvettarayars say that it could well be; I myself, do not think it outside the realm of possibility.”

“Careful, Acharya, for you tread upon dangerous ground now. You dare accuse me of hiring an assassin to murder my own brother?”

“Never, *Thaaye*, not for even a moment! However, you could have been deceived in the man you sent, couldn’t you? Doubtless you trusted him with your confidence—a trust that may have been misplaced. There is the possibility that he was co-opted by others.”

“No, no, never; this man was sent to me by Aditha Karikalan himself with a personal message: I could place all my trust in him; I could—”

“—have been misled and likewise, the crown prince himself, perhaps. Your envoy could have changed sides; he might even have been replaced on his way. And here, I cannot help but speak of a certain accusation that fell on my ears—of spying, flung by a man below, upon the one on the balcony. What of that, *Amma*?”

Kundhavai swallowed. “The one on the balcony was my brother’s messenger—Vallavarayan Vandhiyathevan, of the Vaanar clan. The man below was Pinakapani, the Vaidhyar’s son, and he dared to accuse Vandhiyathevan of being the Pazhuvettarayar’s spy—ah, such arrant nonsense!”

“Is it, *Thaaye*?”

“It couldn’t be otherwise, for he escaped the Pazhuvettarayars’ net and if you only knew the *bramma prayathanam*, the superhuman efforts, the veritable manhunt they arranged just to retrieve him—”

“And the Pazhuvoor signet ring? How came it to be in his possession?”

“Through that vicious, scheming demon—that devious witch, *mayamohini*—poisonous, wicked cobra—forgive me, pray—the Ilaiya Rani of Pazhuvoor, of course.”

“Heartening indeed, to know your awareness of this fact for you certainly would never have believed it from me. Very well; I concede that the Vaanar warrior is no spy of the Pazhuvettarayars—but what of the Pazhuvoor Queen?”

“But how could he possibly be hers?”

“Shall I reveal to you the possibilities? Listen well, my dear: your personal, confidential envoy—the messenger you deployed to Ilankai—met the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani in her palanquin, at the outskirts of Thanjai and it was at this juncture that he received the signet ring. Later, there was a secret assignation within the fort, in her private *anthappuram*. The young queen managed to engineer his escape by smuggling him into the treasure vault—she was aware, naturally, of his carrying an *olai* meant for you. Upon his return from Ilankai occurred another meeting between them—at midnight, in the ruined palace of bygone Pandiyas upon the banks of the River Harichandra … and the signet ring remained in his possession. Your thoughts on these weighty matters would be most welcome, *Amma*, for I should like to know: do you still retain complete faith in your envoy?”

For the first time during the conversation, Kundhavai’s heart truly did sink into a morass of confusion.

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28
A Spy for a Spy

Well, *Thaaye*?" Aniruddhar gently prompted the princess who seemed stunned into silence. "Well? Why do you not speak? Still trust Vandhiyathevan, do you?"

"*Ayya*, Best of Ministers—Gem amongst Advisors! What am I supposed to say?" She spread out her hands. "A little more of this and you shall have convinced me into harbouring grave suspicions about my own self!"

"Such is the situation today, *Amma*; these are uncertain times and in truth, there is simply no knowing who may be trusted. Too many enemies surround in every direction; too many conspiracies too, I might add," Aniruddhar finished, grandiloquently.

"And yet, no foe that you cannot see; no mystery you cannot plumb—after all, you've unearthed every last detail about my personal envoy, haven't you?" Kundhavai fired a retort.

"My eyes number a thousand, *Ammani*; my ears twice that and they are scattered all over this land, pressed into my service even at the Pazhuvoor Palace—one of the Ilaiya Rani's personal bodyguards reports directly to me—in addition to numerous men who roam the country at will, bringing what news they can much in the manner of Azhwarkkadiyaan. Thus far I have been complacent that nothing can occur in even neighbouring kingdoms without my knowledge—and yet, who knows? There might be those who seek to deceive me; conspiracies that evolve beyond my comprehension …" Aniruddhar's voice trailed away; his eyes, resting on the princess, inscrutable.

To Kundhavai, though, the words carried a sting: was the wily minister aware of Ponniyin Selvan's current residence in Choodamani Viharam? It was all the young woman could do to suppress her suspicion, and preserve her shattered composure as well.

“I concede your arguments, *Ayya*—except for your concerns regarding the Vaanar warrior,” she said finally, with a creditable assumption of self-possession. “I simply cannot bring myself to believe that he might be the Ilaiya Rani’s spy and so … kindly sanction his release.”

“I must, at this juncture, beg you to exercise your considerable wits, *Amma*: that young woman Nandhini must surely possess some extraordinary power, some witchery—witness the transformation of the pious Siva devotee Madhuranthakan into a would-be monarch, straining at the leash for the throne; Sambuvaraiyar’s scion Kandamaran ensnared into her net and now actually her envoy, journeying to Aditha Karikalan, her *olai* in his waistband; Parthibendran, once the sworn enemy of the Pazhuvettarayars, now the Ilaiya Rani’s willing, quailing slave—so well-conditioned that he is now an enthusiastic champion of Chozha Nadu’s dissection, even offering to oversee an amicable division: one section for Madhuranthakan with the other allocated to Aditha Karikalan—”

“Atrocious! How *dared* they? Dissecting—partitioning the Chozha *samrajyam*—an empire my ancestors consolidated, spilling their very blood and sweat in the process…!”

“A proposition as repugnant to me as it is to you, *Thaaye*. And ten days ago, Parthibendran would have been roused to righteous anger, no doubt—but now, he stands at the forefront of those who propagate partition—”

“Unbelievable! What wondrous, magical power could the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani possibly possess that …”

“You ask me a question I would have wished to put to you, Princess. Be that as it may, you seem remarkably certain that Vandhiyathevan is an exception to the rule; that he is no willing slave to that woman’s witchcraft—how, may I ask?”

“If you must know, *Ayya*—I must confess I have no proof that would satisfy you. But they do say, don’t they, that hearts mirror honesty? I can see his clearly, and something, some instinct whispers to me that he is trustworthy, and will commit no treachery against me.”

“In that case, *Amma*, we may as well put your belief to the test.”

“Indeed? How so?”

“It is of the utmost necessity to send an envoy to Kanchi at once; an *olai* to Aditha Karikalan through a messenger of inviolable trust.”

“To what purpose?”

“A moment ago, you apologized for comparing to Nandhini to a venomous cobra; I say to you now that she is no poisonous snake but far, far worse for she conspires to destroy the Chozha dynasty, and annihilate every last member.”

“Good God,” Kundhavai’s lips murmured, revealing just a hint of the waves of confused chaos that churned and tossed the sea of her heart. “What horror is this …”

“Hers is the hand that directs Sambuvaraiyar into issuing royal invites to Aditha Karikalan; hers the fertile mind that draws your elder brother to the Kadambur palace where, under her aegis will occur highly confidential dialogues about joining him in matrimony with one each of Pazhuvettarayar’s and Sambuvaraiyar’s daughters; hers the policy that masterminds an amicable partition of the *rajyam* during such a meeting; hers the momentous decisions that govern a nation’s fate … these are the reports that circulate in public. As to her private motivations, buried in the fastnesses of her heart—who can possibly know? Even I, who pride myself on my ability to penetrate the darkest plots and learn the deepest secrets must admit defeat, in her case.”

“What can be done now, *Ayya*? What do you propose?”

“Prevent Aditha Karikalan’s visit to the Kadambur palace at all costs —which is where Vandhiyathevan comes in, for he shall be the envoy that delivers an *olai*, yours and mine, into the prince’s hands. And should our efforts at stopping him fail—should your brother persist in his royal visit—the Vaanar warrior must accompany him. Vandhiyathevan must stay with his lord at all times; as the shadow follows substance must his presence be constant, guarding Aditha Karikalan without pause nor allowing him the opportunity to meet Nandhini alone—”

Kundhavai heaved a deep, perturbed sigh as the implications of the Mudhanmandhiri's strategy unfolded in her mind with startling clarity; the grave, terrible import of his words. Was he indeed in possession of every secret—or was this plan only with regard to political machinations? She did not know; she could not guess. "*Ayya*, why do you consider it so imperative that their meeting be prevented?" She ventured, finally.

"There are Pandiyan *Abathudhavis* still in existence, *Ammani*, sworn to uphold their king's cause, avenge his death by razing the Chozha clan to the ground—and their efforts are funded by gold directly from Periya Pazhuvettarayar's treasury. Need I really say anymore on the subject?"

"Indeed, no," muttered Kundhavai, her thoughts whipping at once, with the speed of a whirlwind, to Ponniyin Selvan who lay ill, fevered, at the *viharam*. What dangers, what horrendous perils might lay siege to him now, this very moment? "Our great good fortune that you're the chief minister at a time when catastrophe upon catastrophe seems determined to bring Chozha Nadu to its knees, *Ayya*," she said, aloud. "And—what arrangements regarding my *thambi*?"

"Orders, my dear, for every shrine of Siva Peruman and Thirumaal to hold special devotions and prayers for the health and happiness, the *sukakshemam* of the prince; *archanai* and *abhishekams* have been sanctioned. Similar rituals shall be performed in Buddhist *viharams* and Jain monasteries; the *bikshus* of Nagappattinam's Choodamani Viharam have decided, in addition, to offer special prayers for the period of a *mandalam*. I hope this is to your satisfaction; what further suggestions might you proffer?"

Kundhavai's eyes flew to Aniruddhar's face at the mention of Choodamani Viharam—was there just a flicker in his eyes; a twitch in his facial muscles; anything that might betray some knowledge? But peer as unobtrusively as she could, there was nothing to be discerned. "Ah, now that you mention Naagai's monastery, I'm put in mind of something," she began with a show of nonchalance. "I hear that Periya Pazhuvettarayar harbours some anger towards this *viharam*—an anger that has mounted, what with news of Ilankai's *bikshus* offering their throne to the prince. The Pazhuvoor lords might retaliate by saddling Naagai monks with the blame for the prince's disappearance; I must beg you to offer them what you can in the way of protection."

“At once, *Amma*—I might even dispatch a small regiment with the Chakravarthy’s official approval, should you so please; now, what of Vandhiyathevan’s mission to Kanchi?”

“Well …” Kundhavai hesitated. “Surely it would be better to assign such an important task to someone else?”

“Should you trust his integrity, I would rather he shouldered this responsibility. Some tales of his wondrous exploits I have heard; a mission such as this requires a man of unflinching courage, lightning reflexes and razor-sharp wits—an *asakaaya sooran* in fact, battled-hardened … why, I saw his combat skills with my own eyes today in the palace courtyard, didn’t I? Ah, the torment the Vaidhyar’s son endured at his hands; the blows; the strikes—had I not intervened at an opportune moment, Pinakapani would have had to give up his career on Earth and practice his skills instead on Yaman, the God of Death—”

Such fulsome praise could not but delight Ilaiya Piratti, who had to expend considerable effort into schooling her features into one of normalcy. “A warrior he might be, but so impulsive,” she continued, however, displaying reluctance. “The speed with which he jumped into battle—”

“—may be curtailed, easily, by my disciple Thirumalai, who shall accompany him,” Aniruddhar assured her. “Azhwarkkadiyaan is renowned, as you know, for forethought and stability.”

I wonder if even God can penetrate this venerable old man’s thought processes, Kundhavai marveled, bemused. *One spy to accompany another? Extraordinary indeed!*

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29
Vanathi‘s Transformation

On her way to secure Vandhiyathevan’s release and task him with his next mission, Kundhavai was accosted by Vanathi who promptly fell at her feet with reverence.

“Ah, I’ve had to leave you alone, my dearest,” Ilaiya Piratti’s voice was warm with affection. “I’m afraid there are a few important tasks that yet need my attention; why don’t you wait in the gardens until I complete them? I’ve just one stipulation: don’t venture near the stream.”

“I shan’t give you another moment’s distress, *Akka*,” Vanathi was subdued. “But I should like to go to Kodumbalur; kindly give me leave.”

“Good God—you too wish to hurl a thunderbolt upon my head, do you? Why this fury with me, and why this sudden, inexplicable love for your home?”

“No one could be more ungrateful if I ever dared be angry with you. I haven’t conceived of a sudden affection for my birthplace either—how could I, orphan that I am? But I did come to know that my mother once made a holy pledge to the Kali shrine nearby—unfortunately, she closed her eyes forever before she could fulfill it. And I—well, I faint so often, don’t I? Perhaps the Goddess is visiting her wrath upon me with a divine curse.”

“If that indeed be the case, your presence at the temple is unnecessary; I shall order the *poojai* performed for your sake.”

“It isn’t just that, *Akka*. My *periya thanthai* is returning from Ilankai, at long last—and you know that he wouldn’t travel beyond Thanjai to visit Pazhaiyarai. His arrival is another reason for my wishing to go to Kodumbalur; I’d like to learn in person everything that happened in Ilankai.”

“Do you, indeed? I wonder why?”

“How could you ask …? Have you forgotten my father’s martyrdom in Eezham?”

“I hadn’t, but as it so happens, that blot has now been erased; honour restored—”

“Not quite. Periya Velaar returns, it seems to me, far sooner than necessary. The war is not ended yet.”

“And you’re going to command him to return to Ilankai forthwith, are you? Make him resume hostilities? Is that what urges you to Kodumbalur?”

“Dare I presume to speak of such things in highhanded fashion? All I wish is to listen to his account firsthand—”

“I understand your secret desire now, my dear,” Kundhavai laughed gently. “What you really want is to ask your *periya thanthai* about Ponniyin Selvan’s brave exploits on the battlefield.”

“Would that be a crime, *Akka*?”

“Not at all, but your deserting me at just this moment—that, I fear, is a grievous crime indeed.”

“Is that indeed true, *Akka*? Aren’t there an hundred maidens surrounding you; a thousand at your feet, eager to consider your slightest wish their command and—”

“Vanathi, you too, have learnt to speak like a trained courtier, have you? The news about my brother has no doubt paralyzed your mind—but there’s no need to worry too much, for—”

“Dare I assume the right to worry more about your brother than even you, *Akka*?”

Kundhavai paused. “The truth, now: did you jump into the water on purpose? Or were you really overcome by faintness …?”

“Why would I tumble into streams willfully? I did indeed feel dizzy; you and the Vaanar warrior together saved my life—”

“You seem strangely ungrateful, considering such signal service.”

“I shall honour my debt in this and the next seven births.”

“This lifetime hasn’t ended here and now, Vanathi—but your speech seems to indicate that you think so. Now, listen: do cast off these dismal thoughts. I really don’t think Arulmozhi Varman is in danger and I shall repeat what I said just now, to the anxious people in the palace courtyard: the divine Mother Kaveri saved my brother once; Samudhra Rajan would have doubtless done the same. Good news shall come soon, never fear.”

“You seem very sure, *Akka*.”

“Had anything truly perilous occurred to my *thambi,* intuition would’ve warned me at once; the last thing I’d be doing is speaking, acting normally …”

“Mine is no comfort to me, *Akka*; I’m not even sure that intuition speaks the truth—conscious or otherwise.”

“You seem very sure, my dear.”

“For some time now, my heart has shown me a strange image—an extraordinary mirage, if you will. I see it in my sleep; I glimpse it in my dreams … and sometimes, I hallucinate even when I’m awake.”

“What sort of an image, Vanathi?”

“I—I see your brother’s face often, reflected in the water. And I seem to hear him calling for me. I experience this in my dreams as well.”

“Hardly a hallucination—why call it that, when your vision corresponds to the news we’ve received?”

“Pray listen, and you’ll realize just how absurd my delusions are: I fainted and tumbled into the stream, didn’t I? You’d be surprised to know that I descended to *Nagalokham* itself. And—there was a wedding—”

“Between whom?”

“I’d rather not say, *Akka*. Dreams and delusions when I’m asleep and awake; the mind’s whisper and heart’s murmur no longer convince me. I’ve sworn, from now on, to believe only what I see, and what I hear —”

“You’re completely wrong, Vanathi. Our eyes and ears may deceive us; their information may even be false—it is the heart that always speaks true. I could give you an hundred examples; a thousand quotes from our divine epics and tales that—”

“Some other time perhaps, *Akka*,” Vanathi shrugged. “Pray give me leave, now.”

Kundhavai stared at her, surprised at this show of defiance. How had this mild-mannered, shrinking little slip of a girl turned so rebellious? Aloud, she still remonstrated. “Must you be in such haste, Vanathi? Even if you do wish to leave, couldn’t you possibly wait a few days? The *rajyam* is drowning in chaos; surely you ought to travel with appropriate escort suited to your station—”

“Why fear, *Akka*? What could possibly happen to me? The palanquin-bearers and soldiers who accompanied me from Kodumbalur have been lounging here for days, sleeping half the day with nothing to do; they will do very well—”

“Well, here’s a pretty tale! And did you really think I’d just send you on the word?”

“I do beg of you, *Akka*, pray release me. I’ve truly nothing to fear, I swear and besides, no Chozha subject would dare accost the Kodumbalur princess, not to mention Ilaiya Piratti’s chosen, beloved companion. I should like to submit just one petition, though: to visit the Kudanthai astrologer’s home just once, and put to him a few questions. May I?”

“I wouldn’t mind a visit myself—but here you are, in such a tearing hurry—”

“I should like permission to visit him alone, this once …”

Kundhavai touched a finger to her nose in a familiar expression of astonishment, stunned outright: how could a day, a single *jaamam* have transformed this timid, nervous young maiden into the very figure of stubborn willfulness? But matters had now gone beyond her; Vanathi could not be stopped, she decided. “Very well; it shall be as you wish. Make arrangements for travel. Meanwhile, I shall return, once I’ve secured the valorous Vaanar warrior’s release from incarceration.”

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30

Prisons, Two

The first sound to assail the princess as she left Vanathi and arrived directly at Vandhiyathevan's cell in the Pazhaiyarai prison, was the merry note of a *themmangu*, a folk song, at the top of someone's voice. Kundhavai, instructing the sentries to stay out of earshot and strolling forward, watched the prisoner, enjoying the rigours of solitary confinement, stare at the ceiling and let go with a raucous rendition:

"Vaana chudarkal ellaam

Maane undanaik kandu

Meni silirkudhadi –

Meimarandhu nirkuthadi!"

Stars lighting the night, find themselves stunned at your exquisite beauty, my doe … ran the lines with glorious abandon, and Vandhiyathevan seemed to have surrendered to the divine calling of folk music—when the sound of a throat clearing brought him back to ordinary, mundane concerns. He sat up at once and caught sight of the princess. "*Varuga*, your highness—welcome, welcome," he paid elaborate obeisance. "Do kindly take your divinely ordained seat!"

"Indeed," remarked the princess. "Which one, pray?"

"We stand now in your palace, your highness, in a land that bows to your rule and your authority; you may seat yourself on any *simmasanam* here of your choosing," Vandhiyathevan declared with a flourish.

"I assume your ancestors' illustrious royal residences in Vallam resembled this building during their magnificent rule of all three worlds, *Ayya*," Kundhavai's dulcet tones were barely laced with mischief. "Here, in this city, though, we call this the prison."

“I regret to say that our city possesses neither palace nor prison, these days; every splendid structure was razed to the ground more than a hundred years ago by a confederation of kings and chieftains—there’s not a stone left, now.”

“What—*why*? Why visit fury on the palatial residences and prisons of Vallam?”

“Blame the benevolence of a *kavignar*, a loose-mouthed poet.”

“Ah? And how did that come about?”

“This was during the era of our greatness, you understand: when my ancestors ruled these lands as emperors in their own right; the matchless, peerless leaders of the south, and one of their time-honoured practices was to send officers to capture and drag back to capital those kings who’d committed the grievous crime of defaulting tribute within the stipulated time. Jail cells lined both sides of the elaborate palace courtyard where these rulers were incarcerated and there they would wait, full of humiliation and penitence, hoping against hope that the emperor’s heart would melt some day; that the great man would summon them; they would crave pardon and finally, finally return home—but alas! When has it ever been easy for petty kings and chieftains, waiting humbly upon Maavendhar Vaanar’s mercy to even gain a glimpse of his royal highness?

“On the contrary, they’re superseded by the much more respected Paavendhars, kings of verse, as it were, who stalk straight to the Vaanar Emperor’s audience chamber, the *aasthaana mandapam*; they shower delectable poems and receive, as a mark of the emperor’s admiration, gifts worthy of a royal. The kings crowding in prisons glare at these offerings and promptly—er—go up in smoke. “*Adada*, this is my umbrella!” groans one; “Isn’t this my palanquin?” laments another, while others moan about their elephants and horses being borne away—by poets too! “*Ayyo*, there goes my royal mount, my elephant!” shouts a third; “*Aha*, my horse—my stallion! For sure it will throw down this Kaviraayan, this poet someday!” cackles a fourth with glee.

“And then, finally, at the tail-end of these much-vaunted bards comes the last; his sharp ears catch the lamentations of these ragged

kings. Every word falls as a seed in his imagination, and out sprouts a song that fills the Chakravarthy's audience chamber:

"En kavikai en sivikai

En kavasam, en thuvasam

En kariyee(thu) en pariyee(thu)

Enbaraal – pan kavala

Maavendhan Vaanan

Varisai parisu petra

Paaventharai, venthar

Paarthu!"

Needless to say, the verse caught the imagination of people who spread it across Tamilagam, singing, repeating and even dancing to the words—but, ah, little did they know that such innocent enjoyment would lead to our *rajyam's* wholesale destruction! For every king of the land joined hands in invasion, marched upon our empire and razed towns; palaces; prisons, everything, into nothing ..."

"No matter; all their efforts couldn't annihilate a single poet's verse, could they? Fortunate indeed is your dynasty for its fame shall never diminish; its shadows never lessen—"

"Alas for its glory then for I, its so-called scion have now arrived to destroy what little reputation we've left—"

"Wonderful. You admit the truth yourself, then?"

"It seems I've no choice and here, I must confess that of all forms of slavery, submission to a female is the worst—witness my own humiliation because I committed the cardinal sin of heeding a woman: not only have I had to run, hide, devise embarrassing escape tactics and live a life of concealment but also bring shame, unbearable shame upon the illustrious name of my glorious dynasty, my forefathers! And when I try to

ease my anger, to find an outlet that might release my pent-up fury by beating the physician's son to death, I find obstacles to even this worthy ambition—"

"I must ask you, *Ayya*; why this unrelenting fury against Pinakapani?"

"*Have* I no reason? Good God, you certainly chose the right man to accompany me, for he almost ruined my mission in Kodikkarai. As if that weren't enough, he accuses me of being an enemy spy right in the middle of this city's streets, and almost hands me to the Pazhuvettarayars! When I finally engineer an escape, he brands me the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani's spy amidst a thousand people in the palace courtyard and—"

"*Ayya*, brave prince of Vallam—that's true, wouldn't you say?"

"What's true, wouldn't I say?"

"Pinakapani's accusation. That you're the confidential spy of Nandhini, Queen of Pazhuvoor. Now, would you kindly confess the truth?"

"Alas *Devi*, that you should ask—for it's been many days since I took a holy vow against truth."

"Indeed—a vow, you declare, and against the truth, too! Dating from your meeting with the Pazhuvoor Queen upon the banks of Harichandra River, perhaps?"

"No, no, certainly not—not then, but much before. Strange are the ways of the world, *Devi*, for as long as I spun completely fabricated tales, people believed every word; but the moment I uttered the inviolable truth—I blurted out once that the prince was safe in Naagaippattinam—not a single soul believed me. On the contrary, there was a wave of laughter—"

"Good God, what a terrible blunder! A blessing indeed that no one gave credence to your words; else, I shudder to think of the consequences—"

“Such blunders as these shall never again occur.”

“Your promise is hereby acknowledged.”

“My what? What did I promise, and when?”

“Just now—that you would commit no mistake, no error but submit to my command henceforth—”

“Good God *Devi*, no, not upon my life. I have only one request: release me; pray give me leave to depart this prison and I shall make my own way...”

“If this be your wish, I declare here and now that you are denied freedom; you will stay incarcerated here forever.”

Vandhiyathevan stared at her—and went into a peal of laughter.

“I see no reason for merriment; I cannot see that I’ve uttered any witticism.”

“You haven’t, *Devi*—but I was wondering: couldn’t I manage to escape even if you never granted release?”

Kundhavai’s beautiful eyes, alight with a new, wondrous glow, settled on him for the space of a moment. “You’re devious enough, *Ayya*, to escape this prison—of that, I’ve no doubt,” she said, finally. “Anything is possible for a man who defeated the infamous vaults of Pazhuvettarayar’s treasury to win his freedom.”

“You may open these doors yourself, in that case.”

“I could. I could secure your release, or you might engineer one—but there’s another prison, an incarceration from which there can be no escape ...”

“Chinna Pazhuvettarayar’s dungeons, you mean?”

“No; not even those horrifying, gloomy cells could terrify you—you may well make mincemeat of the tigers growling at the doors and force your way out.”

“What else, then?”

“The prison that is my heart.”

Vandhiyathevan paused. “I’m an orphan, *Devi*. With neither home nor land to my name. My ancestors are long gone; our illustrious past reduced to fable—the domain of poets; fodder for their creative fancy. You, however—you’re the beloved, precious daughter of the Emperor who rules three worlds ...”

“Who knows? The Chozhas might crumble someday; our fame too, nothing but a fairytale.”

“Perhaps, but not now. Today you’re a figure of unchallenged authority; a woman of unimpeachable trust, of power. Not even the Chakravarthy; the Pazhuvettarayars or the Mudhanmandhiri dare brave your displeasure—”

“If that indeed be the case, I fail to understand how *you* can.”

“Ah, political influence is one thing, your highness—but you referred to something about the heart, didn’t you?”

“And—how is that a crime?”

“The difference between our respective statuses makes it one.”

“You cannot have heard of the ancient proverb: *True love hath no barrier.*”

“A proverb that applies to Ponniyin Selvan and Poonguzhali the boat-girl too.”

“I suppose so. I believed that rulership over the whole world was my brother’s destiny; it is why I wished to bar their hearts—”

“To tell you the truth, there was no end to the tales I’d heard about the prince; in his company, I yearned to march upon every battlefield in all eight directions of the world; to perform splendidly brave exploits and win laurels as a warrior of warriors—”

“You’ve laid that fantasy to rest now, haven’t you?”

“I’ve had to. Ponniyin Selvar would rather enjoy a lifetime of peace than politics; he’d rather pick a chisel and chip at boulders in the cause of temple renovation than wield a sword in the battlefield ...”

“And yet, here’s Madhuranthakan, panting with eagerness to ascend the throne. The goat shifts into a tiger, while a tiger transforms into a goat. You know, undoubtedly of the ancient Saivite tale where *Aalavai* Iraivan, our most divine deity transforms a jackal into a horse and vice versa and just the same way—”

“I too, changed into a jackal through your grace; I hid, ran, tricked, fashioned wily stratagems and invented marvellous tales to escape enemies—ah, there’s no depth to which I haven’t sunk, all for your sake, for the sake of service but no more, *arasilankumari*! No more of this God forsaken mission can I undertake. Pray, pray release me ...”

Kundhavai’s face clouded over. “My boon companion Vanathi has suddenly chosen to desert me *Ayya*, and now—do you too wish to forsake me?”

“I must plead ignorance of the issues between you and the Kodumbalur princess, *Devi*, but to speak of me in the same breath—I, to abandon you? Kings; princes; the very Emperor of Emperors await a word from you, beg for the unimaginable favour of your divine, blessed hand while I—I’m nothing but a petty servant, here to seek refuge at your feet—”

Ilaiya Piratti did something remarkable, then: she stretched out a beautiful, slender hand. Barely aware of himself, Vandhiyathevan took it hesitantly and pressed the delicate, flower-like fingers to his eyes, as though in a dream, heart soaring, body thrilling with nameless exhilaration.

“Warrior of the Vaanar clan,” Kundhavai began slowly. “I’m the scion of a dynasty that values chastity; the women of my ancient family considered this the most priceless of treasures; this was their strength, an armour they cherished more than anything—the one bounty worth guarding, the only legacy worth protecting. Some amongst them have

accompanied their dead husbands into the pyre; they considered the scorching fire that burned their mate's bodies the cool, inviting glow of the moon, and embraced death willingly ..."

"So I've heard, *Devi*."

"Listen, and listen carefully: my hand that has now chosen yours—shall never, ever take another's."

Vandhiyathevan simply stood still, speechless, lifeless and as he gazed deep into her tear-bedewed eyes, strangely witless as well.

"I must beseech you, *Ayya*, to pause just a moment before you rush headlong into hasty ventures—should danger threaten you, what would be my fate?"

Vandhiyathevan finally found his voice. "Could I, the most fortunate of men, the one who has gained the privilege of ascending the throne of your heart be a coward, *Devi*?"

"Cowardice and caution are two entirely different things, *Ayya*; not even Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar entertains the slightest doubt of your innate courage."

"Clearly he doubts something else, then."

"That you might be the Pazhuvoor Rani's spy, yes."

"I'd be happy to offer him the same satisfaction I granted Pinakapani: throw open these doors, and give me that man's direction!"

"The physician's son at least possesses some training in hand-to-hand combat while Aniruddhar is proficient in nothing but word-play; he knows nothing of wrestling. A razor-sharp intellect is his supreme weapon; never a finely honed sword ..."

"Surely he could test the sharpness of mine, eh? Not bad for a maiden experience."

"The Mudhanmandhiri occupies a position of immense esteem second only to the Chakravarthy himself, in this land, *Ayya*. Not even the

Pazhuvettarayars dare publicly court his enmity ...”

“The Pazhuvoor lords, I must point out, harbour the vicious, dishonourable heart of traitors; their fear is understandable—but why should I feel the same?”

“Because the Chief Minister has been my father’s boon companion since childhood; to disrespect him is to dishonour me.”

“In that case, kindly let me know a way to gain his trust.”

“He wishes to send an envoy, a man of integrity to Kanchi. I have recommended your name—as a skilled, trustworthy messenger, offering my own personal assurance.”

“Pray, pray don’t send me there, *Devi*—some instinct warns me of danger; a voice whispers into my heart, *Do not enter Kanchi*!”

“A voice that belongs to the Ilaiya Rani of Pazhuvoor, perhaps.”

“No, never, not on my life! Would I even deign to listen to that vicious cobra, as against you?”

“I must beg you to desist from addressing the Young Queen in such terms, *Ayya*.”

“Good lord, what’s this? Why this sudden change of sentiment?”

“Sudden indeed, but permanent and complete—once you brought me the news from Ilankai.”

“Ah. I’m supposed to treat the Ilaiya Rani with every sign of respect and deference, then?”

“Certainly.”

Vandhiyathevan directed a level glance at her. “Suppose she hands the sword of slaughter she’s been worshipping faithfully, day and night and commands me to chop a head ...” he gave a meaningful pause. “Must I obey without question?”

Silence. Kundhavai Devi's slender body trembled; when she finally spoke, her voice quivered as well. "Deference to the Pazhuvoor Rani does not include unquestioning obedience to her every request, for she ..." the princess moistened dry lips. "She could be unaware of the horror of whatever she's attempting, couldn't she?"

"So she said. *I've no idea why I'm worshipping this sword*, were her exact words as I remember."

"Good God," Kundhavai's voice positively quavered at this. "Only divine grace can save the ancient Chozha clan, now."

"Then may this poor servant be the instrument of such grace; the means of salvation," Vandhiyathevan echoed.

"So I certainly wish, *Ayya*. Once you return from Kanchi, I should like you to leave for Ilankai again; do all you can to bring the mute lady—"

"That would be akin to stuffing a whirlwind into a pot—which reminds me; someone did say the same—ah, yes, that staunch Vaishnavite. He might have been successful in this task."

"He wasn't, as it so happens; it must be you."

"In that case, *Devi* ... don't send me to Kanchi!"

"Why not?"

"I should undoubtedly have to meet my master and at a question from him, every detail would simply dribble from my lips. I cannot vouch for his reaction should he hear of the conspiracies assiduously hatched by Pazhuvettarayar and the others—he'd be roused to fury; at the very mention of the Chakravarthy's near-incarceration, he'd be sure to march with his forces—in fact, I can't be sure that he hasn't already done so, assuming he's heard the news about Ponniyin Selvan ..."

"For which precise reason I'm sending you there—to prevent him from leaving Kanchi."

"What if he's gone by the time I reach the city?"

“Join him wherever he happens to be—for there’s something else that you must, *must* do, more important than anything else ...”

“Pray, tell me.”

“Reports reached me that Periya Pazhuvettarayar has left for Kadambur Palace in company of the Ilaiya Rani—”

“Is it indeed her, or has her palanquin been commandeered by—”

“Not Madhuranthakar; my *chithappa* is here still.”

“And the purpose of their visit?”

“Aditha Karikalan has been issued an invite there as well. Wedding negotiations are touted as the official reason—concealed by the real, frightening motive: partitioning the Chozha kingdom and apportioning territories.”

“Not for a moment would my master allow, or acknowledge this.”

“I care not for that.”

“What else, then, *Devi*?”

“I cannot—I cannot describe the panic that seizes me, these days,” Kundhavai’s countenance was clouded by anxiety. “I’m unable to rest; my heart thuds erratically for no reason—nameless, faceless terrors surround me as I’m half asleep. Horrifying nightmares assault my mind; I startle awake, petrified—and then lie awake for hours, shivering in the aftermath.”

“And this is the moment you choose to dispatch me on a mission—a moment when you need me the most. Whatever the peril, I shall sacrifice myself in your service—”

“You mistake my meaning, *Ayya*; my fears are not for myself—they do not concern me. No, I’m terrified for my elder brother; for the Ilaiya Rani. I panic whenever I think of their possible meeting; I shudder to think of the consequences ... you must make sure they never see each other alone—”

“I daren’t obstruct him if he’s taken it into his head to go his way, *Devi*.”

“You must be the iron armour that shields him day and night, *Ayya*—and if necessary, divulge the truth about Nandhini—”

“He might not believe me.”

“Convincing him would be your mission. Do not ask me how—for I don’t know. If you could only prevent them from meeting, somehow ...”

“I shall do everything in my power to fulfil your wishes, *Devi*,” promised Vandhiyathevan. “But I beg you not to blame me, should I lose.”

“Victory or otherwise, *Ayya*, there can be freedom; no release for you,” Kundhavai said, gently. “ ... from the prison of my heart.”

•

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Jackal and Horse:

This famous tale is part of an ancient Tamil collection, the illustrious ***Thiruvilaiyadal Puraanam*** that details Siva Peruman’s many divine deeds for his beloved devotees; one such is the episode of ***Manicka Vaasagar****,* part of the holy quartet at the forefront of the great pantheon of Saivite Saints, the *Arubathu Moonru Naayanmaar*, or the Sacred Sixty-Three. In a nutshell, Manicka Vaasagar, noble minister to the Pandiyan King is asked to purchase stallions but the former, steeped in *siva bhakthi*, uses the treasury to fund a temple instead; the king, furious, throws him into prison, where the minister is subjected to debilitating torture. Meanwhile, Siva Peruman, eager to establish his devotee’s *bhakthi*, transforms the jackals in the forest into horses and himself arrives at the head of a massive cavalry, disguised as a warrior, whereupon the Pandiya king is duly impressed and releases Manicka Vaasagar forthwith. The horses in the royal stables, now changed back into jackals, hurtle into the forest. The Pandiya king realizes the miracle that has just taken place and pays due obeisance to Manicka Vaasagar, who gains renown as the composer of the famed ***Thiru Vaasagam***.

There’s more to this tale of course—more exquisite details and certainly many divine miracles, all of which deserve the space of a whole book.

31
Verdant, Shimmering Silk

Vandhiyathevan was cantering along the River *Arisilaaru* en route to Kudanthai the next morning, armed with an *olai* from Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar; his pace was slow as he took care not to hound his stallion, lost, instead, in the beauteous vista spreading before his eyes.

Chozha Vala Nadu was proving worthy of its prosperous title, thrilling to the bounty of the season; the month of *Aippasi*, just begun, had already showered its wealth and Mother Nature fairly glowed, clad in shimmering waves of alluring emerald, her youthful, radiant loveliness enhanced by verdant silk—and oh, the hues that rippled and danced across the eye-catching expanse! Rice plants about to be weighed with golden grains a shade of green; young stalks a few weeks old sporting a rich green; newly planted tender shoots a pale, golden-green! Ah, stately banyan and rustling *Arasu* leaves of a deep, majestic green; broad lotus-leaves crowding the surface of *thadaagams*—a bewitching, lush green; long, lovely plantain sheaves an eye-catching, brilliant green; ivory-sheened tender coconut fronds, touched by the faintest green; meadows stretching into the distance, topped with fresh grass of soft green; bubbling streams, their waters a clear green; frogs hopping about the wet, muddy banks, their bodies a deep, jeweled green …and as though to show off these fascinating shades, acting as foil to this rich foliage bloomed lilies, lotuses, *sengazhuneer* and *kuvalai* flowers, the reds, pinks, blues and whites gleaming like stars in a green sky.

Vandhiyathevan kept an even pace, drinking in the sheer beauty of this outstanding landscape, aware of the differences between his previous journey during the month of *Aadi*, and this one. The rivers had frothed and seethed then, fresh floods flecked with foam, thundering along the banks—now the fury had abated somewhat and the flow was serene; the angry red tinge had disappeared and the previous deluge was now a placid, tranquil procession, regal almost. *Aadi* had been a festival with the river in raucous flood—"***Ho***!" to the accompaniment of the restless whirr of West Winds in trees and the long, fluting calls of a

thousand enthusiastic birds—a massive, thunderous celebration. Now, however, the glorious revelry had died down: *marmaraa* … rustled leaves at the gentle nip of chilly Vaadai winds; *salasalasala* … trickled water along newly shored canals in fields; rough and guttural rose the calls of *mandukams*, frogs perpetually off-note; endlessly buzzed in several subdued pitches, the bees and beetles. Lady Nature's orchestra was no longer shrieking tunes, instead following a gentler, almost sorrowful medley.

A sorrow that seemed to echo in Vandhiyathevan's heart as well—and try as he might, there was no divining the cause. Surely there was reason enough to shout and sing in celebration? Every outrageous castle in the air he'd built two months ago as he cantered along this very path had reached completion; every fantastic *manoradham* had delivered him to a destination above and beyond his imaginings. Events he'd barely dared to dream of had actually materialized: an audience with Chakravarthy Sundara Chozhar; the chance to see such wondrous, illustrious cities as Thanjavur, Pazhaiyarai, Maathottam and even Anuradhapuram; the grand, almost unattainable prospect of not only meeting Ponniyin Selvan but also claiming his friendship and not just that—the good fortune to save that brave prince from grave peril and then … even glimpsing, just once, that glorious Goddess of Beauty, the light of the Chozha clan, *arasilankumari* Kundhavai was a rare, golden opportunity, the result of rigorous penance in a thousand lifetimes—*and here I am, the privileged recipient of her divine love! Ah, what an extraordinary blessing is this*, his heart swelled with exhilaration and justifiable pride. And yet, underneath the delight; the thrill of happiness niggled one uncomfortable thought, an indefinable grief, a smouldering ember of melancholy that threatened to douse the deluge of ecstasy: did he really deserve this stroke of good fortune? There was many a slip between the cup and the lip, after all: what if all this vanished—how many obstacles before he finally achieved heart's desire; how many hurdles? Ah, there was no end to those, after all—this world was a giant cauldron of perils, barriers and complications supplied liberally by horrifying magicians like Ravidasan; women of terrifying beauty, *mayamohinis* such as Nandhini; conspirators such as Pazhuvettarayars; betrayers, slayers of faith like Kandamaran and Parthibendran; blundering idiots such as Poonguzhali and Vanathi; staunch Vaishnavite spies; alarming Kaalaamuka Saivites; gaping quagmire demons and

treacherous bogs of depths unknown, unseen … ah, didn't these and more endanger his world? Thank God, he prayed fervently, for divine grace that had helped him escape each of these snares until now … and for what? Only to be commanded towards the biggest of them all, the greatest hazard—by Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar!

There's impulsive Aditha Karikalar on one side, he mused, *unruly of temperament; quick to anger, to descend into thoughtless fury and then, on the other side, Nandhini, a bewitching beauty who's embroiled regal, powerful Periya Pazhuvettarayar himself in her ruthless toils—and I'm supposed to come between them; I'm supposed to destroy their resolutions and win! What a hope, and what an impossible task—and what on earth does that much-vaunted Brahmaraayar really think? Is his true motivation something else altogether; to separate me from the princess—is* ***that*** *what all this is about? They promised, too, that Azhwarkkadiyaan would join me somewhere on the way before long but so far, no sign of him*.

And here again is an enigma, Vandhiyathevan sighed. *Still, it wouldn't do to revile the Veera Vaishnavite too much; no matter his character, he's never done harm—quite to the contrary, he's actually helped me out of many a sticky situation. Besides, travel in his company would go a long way towards warding off boredom; we could spend hours in interesting conversation; cross-and-jostle work … but it's a little too late now, perhaps. Unlikely that he'd join me at this late stage; there's no point in reining in, slowing to a trot in the vain hope that I might stumble across him—wait—ah, what's that place, thick with trees? Strong roots, hovering over the river like crocodiles—wasn't this the site of the famed Spear-Throw Adventure? And those young ladies Varini, Tharakai, Senthiru and Mandhakini—this was where they stood, giggling outrageously at my courageous feat; this was also where the princess, arasilankumari hastened to my defence, stifling their merriment with a few well-chosen words of rebuke—it was here, all of it! May as well linger awhile in reminiscence …*

Vandhiyathevan slipped off his mount and sauntered towards the banks, staring hard at the clear waters that swirled gracefully around tree-roots and … ah, that face mirrored upon the surface—those indistinct features that resolved by the moment into one delightful, golden countenance—whose could it be but that of princess Kundhavai?

“Kanden kanden kanden

Kannukkiniyana kanden!”

I see; my eyes glimpse; my vision gladdens at this most glorious sight …

Vandhiyathevan jumped at the disembodied voice, considerably startled—and then, prompted by some instinct, swiftly stared upwards. There, upon one of the highest branches of a majestic tree perched Azhwarkkadiyaan, large as life and twice as natural.

“How marvelous that I appear to you in such a divine light, staunch Vaishnavite,” Vallavarayan grinned appreciatively. “I’m quite a vision, I know—but my eyes would like to gladden at your remarkable person too: kindly descend, I beg you.”

“You mistake my meaning, *Appane*,” Thirumalai huffed as he slithered down laboriously. “The terrifying sight of you, clad in murderous swords and spears, could hardly gladden *my* eye or heart.”

“What else could, and to whom?”

“The celestial spectacle of Thirumaal, greatest God of all, raising a foot to measure the very heavens in His divine incarnation of Vaamanan, gawked at by none other than your beloved Siva Peruman—”

“Halt right there, Vaishnavite; cease your blasphemous talk of Sivan or you’ll be made to regret it, I swear—”

“Will I, now? And how? Who may lay a finger on me as long as the Lord, the most gracious God Who Saved the Elephant from the Crocodile stands by my side and—”

“I’ve delivered my warning; the rest is up to you.”

“None of that half-baked nonsense; reveal the danger that threatens me.”

“Since you ask,” Vandhiyathevan heaved a much put-upon sigh. “Remember the mob surge into Pazhaiyarai’s palace courtyard? Well, I

couldn’t help but overhear snatches of conversation between a few Kaalaamukars.”

“Did you, now?”

“Indeed. They spoke worriedly of the growing Vaishnavite population and swore to sacrifice every one of them to Goddess Mahakali; the decapitated heads would be collected and the skulls spread out for Kaalaamukars to perform a rousing, joyful *Anandha Thaandavam* and if that doesn’t curdle your blood—”

“Hardly.” Azhwarkkadiyaan felt his soon-to-be-sliced skull. “Mine is thick enough to withstand a Kaalaamukan’s Dance of Delight, I should think.”

“I must ask you not to disregard my generous warning, oh Vaishnavite, for as though to prove the truth of my words, what must I see all along my way but terrifying Kaalaamukars striding with thunderous expressions, armed with human skulls and treacherous *soolayudhams*! A word from the wise: you’d better divest yourself of this guise in Sivan’s name, starting with that tuft—”

“No, not on your life!”

“What wouldn’t you do, on my life?”

“Utter that one’s name, of course. Not that I mightn’t change my attire, chanting the holy name of Vishnu of course, and—look over there!”

On the road hugging the river jogged a palanquin, clearly with an occupant—but beyond the fact that it was a woman, nothing could be divined. Royal, of a certainty, but *who*? A female attendant accompanied the bearers … wait, could it be the princess herself? Impossible.

“Care to guess that passenger’s identity?” Vandhiyathevan began, casually. “Or do you know, for a fact?”

“A word from the wise, *Thambi*: never poke your nose into business that isn’t yours,” was Azhwarkkadiyaan’s careful answer. “You’ve experienced more than your share of trouble as a result of previous

encounters, I should think. Thousands may ride and drive along these roads, but none of them concern you; climb upon your horse and nudge him into a gallop, I say!"

"Oho, is that indeed so, respected Vaishnavite? I'm to mind my own business, am I? Thy gracious holiness has grown too austere; thy vow of non-interference must be of recent date too, or has thy flexible memory conveniently forgotten all that transpired in Veera Narayanapuram—that you begged me carry an *olai* to a certain young woman in a closed palanquin?"

"Ancient history, my good fellow; the leaves of which must never be turned—why indulge in a pointless exercise?"

"Fair enough; I concede that point. Now, I've been reining in my horse on your account—are you going to accompany me at least from this point?"

"I don't see how, for you ride while I walk. Far better if you waited for me on the banks of the Kollidam; I shall join you tomorrow morning."

That Azhwarkkadiyaan was engaged on another, secret mission and would not, therefore, accompany him was a suspicion already rooted in Vandhiyathevan's heart—a suspicion that established itself at this answer. "As you wish, then," shrugged the Vaanar warrior and leapt back upon his horse. Glancing at the route he was to take, he spied dark, rumbling rainclouds gathering in the north-eastern horizon. "Will it rain today, Vaishnavite?"

"I'm no astrologer, *Appane*, but this being *Aippasi*, I shall make an educated guess: it possibly might. You'd do well to spur your horse—find a *chathiram* or *chaavadi* for the night," Azhwarkkadiyaan counselled.

Vandhiyathevan decided to act on this sage advice, but one particular word niggled in the back of his mind—something about an astrologer—and on its heels followed memories of Kudanthai *jothidar* and then … why, wasn't his home right on his way? A visit might not go amiss: who, amongst the many contenders, would be so fortunate as to ascend the Chozha throne? And as for Ponniyin Selvar, vociferously compared by this very astrologer to the strong, steady Dhruva star—

while said prince simply refused to even consider the possibility of rulership; witness the speed, the nonchalance with which he set aside Ilankai's throne and glittering crown! But the *jothidar* hadn't been wrong on all counts: his highness was plagued by endless peril, which led to the possibility of other predictions coming true: would Arulmozhi Varmar attain heights of greatness as well? But how *could* he? *And me—what of me? How many of my dreams, my aspirations are to come true? Is there the slightest, slenderest possibility of regaining lost glory; the ancient kingdom of my ancestors? And this, my current mission—what are its chances of success? But then, what hope can exist for a task meant to obstruct Aditha Karikalar and Nandhini, in truth? I've been marvelously lucky so far, to have escaped the Pazhuvoor Queen's clutches twice or thrice—can I, once more?*

Fear seized him at the very thought of the Ilaiya Rani; a panic that threatened to numb his senses. She'd certainly been kind, treating him with a respect and goodwill unforeseen, but he couldn't gauge her emotions; couldn't plumb the depths of her heart—and that terrified him. Her intentions were murky; her motives mysterious; she'd spared his life for an important, as yet unknown purpose. Her patience certainly indicated a reason—but what on earth could it be?

Lost in thought, he guided his horse into a steady canter on the road, passing, without a thought, the palanquin that had travelled ahead just awhile ago. Unlike a previous encounter, neither horse nor palanquin possessed the slightest inclination to run into each other; however, the latter's screen did rustle and shift a little as the stallion trotted past, allowing Vandhiyathevan to recognize its graceful occupant: the Kodumbalur princess Vanathi.

Ought I to stop, he wondered briefly, before deciding against it and galloping forward. Ilaiya Piratti's words concerning this young woman drifted into his mind: where was she going during these uncertain times, when peril surrounded in all four directions? Not even an appropriate escort, he noted, as his sharp eyes registered another bizarre sight: two terrifying Kaalaamukars standing at a little distance, staring hard at the princess's palanquin. *Why this intense scrutiny*, he wondered. *And who were they? Why, not—not the two who paused by my side on the banks of the Harichandra River, spouting a load of drivel?*

That Vandhiyathevan felt little sympathy for Vanathi was, if he must admit it to himself, the truth. She was trying to force her way into Ponniyin Selvar's heart—a heart that was Poonguzhali's by rights, he felt. His anger at her for this reason aside, there was something he could not ignore: Kundhavai's boundless affection for this slip of a girl. Any danger to Vanathi would grieve Ilaiya Piratti beyond measure … but then, surely nothing threatened the Kodumbalur maiden?

Do not interfere in what doesn't concern you; mind your own business. Wise words indeed, from Nambi; true and fair. And yet—and yet … that picture, that alarming picture of two Kaalaamukars concealed by the foliage, staring intently at Vanathi's steadily moving palanquin… it obtruded into his mind more than once; he could not ignore it.

But here's Kudanthai astrologer's home and I can ask him about—ah, fool that I am, why did it never occur to me that Vanathi Devi might be bound for the same destination? Well, the fruit's fallen into milk, as the saying goes: I shall have finished my business and be well on my way by the time she arrives.

With these encouraging thoughts, Vandhiyathevan tethered his horse in front of the astrologer's home and entered the small dwelling.

•

32
The Head of Brahma!

An unexpected emotion—exhilaration, Vandhiyathevan recognized, coupled with dizzy delight—bubbled up as he stepped within Kudanthai astrologer's home for a second time. And why not? Wasn't it in this tiny dwelling that he'd first glimpsed the divinely fair Ilaiya Piratti, stunned by features exquisite as a lotus, and large, dark eyes widening slightly in astonishment? Wasn't it here that her voice had first fallen on his ears—a voice the very essence of honey; nay, even sweeter? The memories engulfed him; a maelstrom of ecstasy sweetened his ears, his heart and thrilled his very being.

The *jothidar*, engrossed just then in preparations for evening devotions, caught sight of him. "Welcome, *Appane*; do enter—Vallavarayan of the Vaanar clan, if I am not mistaken?" came his enthusiastic voice.

"The very same. Erratic predictions aside, your memory certainly is excellent," Vandhiyathevan quipped.

"A most valuable tool for *Jothida Saasthram*, *Thambi*. An hundred thousand combinations are possible with planets, stars, phases, sub-divisions and their respective fortunes—and when it comes to keeping in mind all these and calculating predictions based on the year, month, day, *naazhigai*, a moment and then one hundredth of a second … well! You may determine the immense complications yourself. Be that as it may—what was that about erratic predictions? Where and how did my methods go wrong? Did none of my forecasts come true?"

"There's no way of discovering that either through astrology, I suppose."

"By all means, *Thambi*—why not? An hundred means to discern anything, both through astrology and deduction. As for you—my

predictions in your case must have come true, or I would not be welcoming you into this hut a second time."

"Indeed yes; they did."

"Aha, say it like it is! And in what way, *Appane*?"

"Everything; word for word. When you predicted: *Your mission might go forward, or perhaps not,* it was exactly as you said; in fact, it would be a mistake to say that it went anywhere—it simply took to its heels at the very sight of me!"

"You certainly possess an amusing tongue, *Thambi*."

"Truer words were never spoken: An amusing tongue—an angry one, too, I might add."

"One must always bundle away wrath before entering this hut."

"Such was certainly my intention—except that your *sishyan*, your beloved disciple was missing at the entrance and I was seized by a quandary: what if someone made off with my precious bundle of fury? You'll see now that I was bereft of choice in the matter—speaking of which; where's he? The sight of him angrily barring way during my last visit is remarkably fresh in my mind—"

"Today happens to be *Amavaasai*, of the *Aippasi* month; likely, he is at the Kollidam."

"I fail to see the connection between New Moon and riversides."

"The Kaalaamukars' Mahasangam gathers on the banks of the Kollidam today; my disciple belongs to that sect."

"Do you know, *Jothidar* … I'm seriously considering the possibility of renouncing Saivism."

"And …?"

"Remember your friend Azhwarkkadiyaar?"

“You refer to Thirumalai, I suppose?”

“Indeed; I propose to accept spiritual *theetchai* from him, draw *naamam* symbols all over my body and convert to the Veera Vaishnavite sect.”

“I wonder why?”

“I’ve been glimpsing Kaalaamuka Saivites practically everywhere—even on my way here; the sight of them and their human skulls makes me reconsider my own faith; why shouldn’t I renounce it?”

“Surely you, who must have witnessed countless battlefields, do not fear a few skulls?”

“Not that, no—but I must admit to disgust. What’s the connection between slaughtering foes and wearing their skulls?”

“Your own lord and master Aditha Karikalar chopped Veera Pandiyan’s head and showed it off in a glorious triumphal procession, didn’t he?”

“Only because he’d sworn an oath to that effect, or some such thing. I know for a fact that he regretted it later with all his heart—but even he didn’t descend to wearing his foe’s head around his neck, or displaying it proudly with his own hands … so why do the Kaalaamukars indulge in it?”

“To remind themselves of the fleeting, transitory quality of life, *Thambi*, why else? What of our own practice of smearing *thiruneeru*, sacred ash upon ourselves? Only to keep in mind that this body is a temporary abode that shall be reduced to a handful of ashes, someday.”

“You may well be right—dust might be our fate at some point, but not Siva Peruman’s surely? Why does that great lord sport human skulls?”

“To show that one may attain a state of eternal bliss by defeating the sin of pride, for that is what the skull in His hands denotes: arrogance. After all, does He not perform the dance of divine ecstasy with the selfsame object?”

“How can a skull represent any such thing? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“There are a great many things in the universe beyond your comprehension, *Thambi*—but lend your ears to this, for now: Once, Thirumaal and Brahmmadevan grew intensely arrogant, each arguing that they were the greatest; Siva Peruman appeared and promptly devised a test by which their abilities might be proven: *One of you must go to my head and the other, my feet*, He explained. *And whosoever is the first to reach their destination and return to me is the greatest amongst you*. Maha Vishnu instantly transformed into a boar and burrowed through the earth while Brahma assumed the form of a Swan and ascended to the heavens. Thirumaal returned after a time, defeated; he had not been able to glimpse Sivan’s feet and admitted the truth. Brahma too returned—but lied that he had accomplished his task! Siva Peruman punished him by plucking one of Brahma’s five heads, upon which humiliation the Lord of Creation flounced away in a rage and so, his head became the symbol for arrogance …”

Abruptly, Vandhiyathevan burst into laughter as though reminded of something.

“Such amusement, *Thambi*. Why?”

“Something occurred to me, is all.”

“And ….? No secret, I trust.”

“Not at all. I just realized… if someone landed me with Brahma’s punishment, I’d need at least ten thousand heads at a minimum and well —I couldn’t contain myself.”

“Lies without end, eh?”

“Probably the result of my horoscope. I’d decided on complete and utter honesty once I met Ponniyin Selvar and even blurted out a most significant truth, once—but people simply cackled; not a soul believed it.”

“A sign of our times, *Thambi*. How can one expect the common man to believe the truth when he will not accept even a lie?”

“Your own predictions have been consigned to a similar fate, I suppose? Now, I must ask you this: remember your marvelous prophecies about Arulmozhi Varmar? Didn’t you wax lyrical about him being the glowing Dhruva Star, shining steadily upon the northern horizon?”

“So I did; what of it?”

“You haven’t heard the news about him, then?”

“I could hardly have avoided knowing a report that has set the whole kingdom by the ears.”

“Ever heard of the Dhruva star drowning in the ocean?”

“I have not—because it cannot, and will not. But thunderclouds may obscure even such a shining celestial ornament, couldn’t they? Just as they rumble across the northern skies even as we speak; you could not glimpse the Dhruva star now no matter how you tried. This does not mean that it no longer exists, does it?”

“Is that how it is? You wouldn’t happen to know the truth of the reports about Ponniyin Selvar, would you?”

“Impossible. If anything, *you* should—word is that you were last seen jumping into the sea alongside him … and I was hoping for news.”

“So, revered astrologer,” Vandhiyathevan changed tack, intending to steer the conversation from this rather treacherous channel. “What’s the comet’s status?”

“Appears immensely long, especially during the latter part of the night. Doubtless it will shrink, henceforth. If any catastrophe is indicated, now would certainly be the moment,” prophesied the astrologer. “Only the good God above knows the fate of the royals!”

Vandhiyathevan’s heart raced here, there, in every direction: Sundara Chozhar in Thanjai, bedridden and helpless by paralysis; Ponniyin Selvar in Naagai, shivering in the grip of a killing ague; Aditha Karikalar bound for the Kadambur palace and a meeting with Nandhini; Madhuranthakar, seized by soul-shaking desire for the Chozha throne

and thus the wholesale target of the citizens' wrath; Nandhini, who kissed and cradled a sword of slaughter in her dainty hands … all paraded in his startled mind's eye. "Be that as it may," he returned to earth and gathered his composure. "We've nothing to do with royals, after all. What I'd like to know is the outcome of my own mission. Well?"

"I can only repeat what I said before, *Appane*. A thousand perils will accost you, but you shall triumph over all—with help from unexpected but welcome sources."

And which is the latest arrival going to be, Vandhiyathevan mused. *Help? Or hindrance?* For indeed, a babble of voices, both male and female arose from the entrance, and the men turned at once to the front door.

Vanathi Devi and her devoted maid entered the next instant.

"*Devi*," Vandhiyathevan rose at once, deferential. "Forgive me—had I known that this was your destination, I wouldn't have set foot here."

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33
Vanathi's Request

Such anger, *Ayya*," the Kodumbalur princess's feeble voice, full of entreaty, melted Vandhiyathevan's heart. "What have I ever done to incur your displeasure?"

What indeed, the thought occurred to him, suddenly. *The girl's guilty of nothing; there's really no reason for my irrational wrath*. Poonguzhali's expressive face flashed in his mind's eye for just a moment. *Why be furious with Vanathi on her account*? Aloud, he remonstrated, "Forgive me, *Ammani*—I meant no offense; only that I would've waited outside until your appointment with the *jothidar* ended, for I'm in no hurry. Why, even now—"

"There's no need to leave, *Ayya*—in fact, I'm relieved that you're in no haste. I'd no intention of meeting this astrologer, if you must know; in fact, I've lost what little faith I had in his phenomenal predictions …"

"With no wish to oppose your gracious highness, I must yet say that the truth of my prophecies shall be realized, one day," said astrologer declared with a flourish. "And then—and then, my lady, you shall felicitate this poor servant yourself!"

"Assuming that day arrives," was Vanathi's noncommittal remark. Then, she turned to Vandhiyathevan. "The purpose of my visit was to see *you*, in fact. I watched you ride by and fully expected you to stop and enquire … but you never even glanced in my direction. Not that that surprised me—for who could spare the slightest thought for an orphan without a soul in the world?"

Tears threatened to gather in Vandhiyathevan's eyes. "Good God—what sort of speech is this, *Devi*? An orphan—why, who'd dare say such a thing of Kodumbalur Paranthaka Siriya Velaar's beloved daughter; the ward of Boodhi Vikrama Kesari, Senathipathi of the Southern Chozha Forces; the beloved confidante of Pazhaiyarai's Ilaiya Piratti herself? I

rode past merely because stopping on the road to exchange pleasantries would be disrespectful to someone of your stature; really, there was no intent to ignore, believe me. Now, if I could be of some service—”

“Indeed you could, *Ayya*; I hastened here to request, no, beseech you for aid—”

“By all means, *Devi*; if it is within my means, that is—”

“I refuse to believe that there could be a mission beyond you; I’ve heard a good deal of your adventures in Ilankai, you see. But first—could you swear to fulfill my request?”

“I’d rather you revealed it in its entirety, *Devi*,” Vandhiyathevan answered with palpable reluctance.

“You do well to be so cautious, *Ayya*; one ought not to deceive anyone into anything, after all. Very well—I shall lay it out before you and the *jothidar* may bear witness as well, for no harm can come of his knowing. You see, I’ve come to an important decision about my life: to convert to Buddhism and take vows as a *bikshuni*, a female monk—”

“*What*?”

“Such appalling words—”

“The world would not stand for it—”

“Impossible—this cannot be allowed to happen!”

Vanathi, listening to these staccato statements of outrage, nodded. “I’m afraid I’ve made up my mind—but must my decision shock you? Why these objections? What crime have I committed? After all, tales abound of women in ancient Tamilagam renouncing the world; witness Madhavi from the epic *Silappathikaaram*—didn’t her own daughter achieve divine status as a monk? Don’t we worship her even today as Goddess Manimekala? But pray do not think me arrogant enough to attain such superior heights for I know my limitations. I tried to end my existence but failed miserably; I must suppose that the good God above wishes me to retain life for awhile more—but what little time I possess in this world I wish to dedicate to my fellow creatures in a spirit of

jeevakaarunyam, of charity, in a Buddhist monastery. Surely you cannot hesitate to aid my cause?"

A tiny seed of suspicion sprouted in Vandhiyathevan's quick brain, startling him considerably. "Your decision is unwarranted, *Devi*—and yet, it isn't for me to raise objections; the elders of your family, rather, are the ones with the right to offer counsel. In fact, I've learnt that your *periya thanthai*, Senathipathi Boodhi Vikrama Kesari is on his way home even as we speak—"

"I shall wait for no one, *Ayya*; neither do I require anyone's advice. I've made up my mind and seek your help—"

"I fail to understand how I could be any use to your gracious self."

"That, I can reveal: I set out with the intention of travelling to Choodamani Viharam, where I shall pay obeisance at the feet of the resident monks, and accept *theetchai* from their blessed hands. I beg your escort on my journey—you see, now, the aid I ask of you."

Vandhiyathevan almost jumped out of his skin. *Ha, the princess of Kodumbalur is no naïve maiden*, he thought, aggrieved and rather rueful. *Some, at least, of my conversation with Ilaiya Piratti must have fallen on her ears; now she wants every last detail from me—and there's no doubt that her sudden journey to Naagaippattinam is with the intention of meeting the prince! I cannot*, he swore to himself, *be a party to this.* "I crave pardon, *Ammani*," he said, aloud. "But what you seek is beyond my means."

"I am all astonishment! Do you indeed mean to say that an escort detail for a pitiful orphan as far as Naagai would be too much for a warrior with a string of marvelous accomplishments in Ilankai to his credit?"

"Never above my capabilities, *Devi*—rather, that it's out of my power to undertake this task just now. The Mudhanmandhiri and Ilaiya Piratti have both bidden me to Kanchi on a mission of considerable haste; I'm honour-bound to travel as fast as I can with their olai. Had this not been a royal affair of such grave importance—had it been any other time, I might've obliged—"

“Indeed, there can be no lack of excuses for unwillingness. I did set out with every intention of travelling alone, but the sight of a few Kaalaamukar groups along the way frightened me, I must admit,” Vanathi bit her lips. “Well, the good God guards all creatures big and small and I shall continue, placing my trust in Him. In any case, who shall molest a harmless girl committed to renunciation?” She turned to the astrologer and folded her palms. “Give me leave, *Ayya*.” And stepped out on the word.

“*Devi*,” Kudanthai’s exalted *jothidar* dogged her heels. “The night deepens as we speak; *Amavaasai* spreads wings of darkness—thunderclouds rumble in the north-east. I pray you tarry in this servant’s hut and—”

“Forgive me, but it’s my intention to spend the night at Thiruvaarur and now that this kind gentleman has refused his escort—well, doubtless I shall find other, well-intentioned people. Not that I care about my safety, you understand; my existence is not of the slightest use to anyone in this world—”

These were the last words to fall on the collective ears of Vandhiyathevan and the astrologer for Vanathi had climbed into her palanquin, which began to jog away the next instant. The two men hesitated on the threshold, watching the small cavalcade disappear into the distance.

“Did you know,” Vallavarayan began reminiscently. “I remember the Kodumbalur princess as a shivering coward until very recently; the butt of teasing jokes by Ilaiya Piratti’s host of mischievous maidens—why, the memory of their prank is still fresh in my mind: they tried to terrify her by floating a stuffed crocodile into the river, you see … I fell for it myself, I confess. And now this! The courage of this shrinking, slip of a girl! I’m stunned at the transformation—not to mention the very idea of travelling alone—shocking, I tell you. How on earth did Kundhavai Devi agree to this sudden start?”

“I am astonished myself—the last time she visited my hut, this young lady suddenly fainted; her voice was so feeble that I could barely hear her few hesitating comments. And now—now I wonder if the Kodumbalur

princess is the same woman! Witness the swift, sharp words; the spirit, the liveliness!”

“Hazard a reason for this remarkable change, why don’t you,” Vandhiyathevan urged. “What could’ve caused it?”

“She might have heard something so cataclysmic that it paralyzed her mind and heart.”

“What could that be?”

“News of Ponniyin Selvar’s drowning would be enough, surely? Wasn’t there even talk of their marriage, at one time?”

News of the prince’s death? Vandhiyathevan pondered the astrologer’s words. *Or of him alive and safe in Naagaippattinam? The words I let slip about Poonguzhali? Which of these could possibly have scrambled her wits?* “Considering the Kodumbalur clan’s intense pride in their Veera Saivite affiliations, *Ayya*,” he mused, aloud. “What could explain this young woman’s sudden craze for Buddhism?”

“The faint echoes of a previous birth?” suggested the astrologer.

“But why the inexplicable partiality for Choodamani Viharam? Why dash to Naagai, of all places?”

“A decision that puzzles me as well.”

“You couldn’t peer into your many astrological texts and divine an explanation?”

“How could I? Information such as this can only be unearthed through *Otraadal*, the Science of Spying, rather than Astrology.”

“An entire science, you say?”

“And why not, pray? Have you never heard, young man, of the magnificent *Thirukkural*, composed by the eminent *Poyyamozhi Pulavar*?”

“It does seem to ring a bell. But only faintly.”

“That precious composition contains an entire section, an *adhikaaram* known as *Otraadal*, devoted entirely to Intelligence, possessing a total of ten couplets.”

“Indeed? A sample of one or two good ones, please.”

“All are excellent; now listen:

“Vinai seivaar than sutram

Vendaathaar endraangu

anaivaraiyum aaraaivathu otru.”

“A monarch worth the title should set spies to glean the motives of not just his enemies, but his servants and his very blood, says Valluvar. Here is another:

“Thurandhaar padivathaaraaki

iranthaaraaindhu

En seyinum sorvila thotru.”

“The poet further sets down ways and means to be adopted by a good spy, who must assume the guise of monks; act the part of a corpse and never divulge his secrets no matter how terrible the torture inflicted upon him and in this way, must discharge his royal duties without the slightest sign of fatigue; always constant and tireless in his service to the king.

“And then, Valluvar also goes on to say that an excellent ruler always sets a spy upon spies, so he may never be deceived or tricked. Hark!

“Otrotrit thantha

Porulaiyum matrumor

Otrinaal otrik kolal.”

Now, do you mean to say that you have truly never heard of any of these?”

Vandhiyathevan listened to this peroration, lost in a sea of astonishment. A complete treatise on spying! He would devour *Thirukkural* in its entirety the moment he had some time to himself, before engaging in anything else, he decided promptly—for what a phenomenal genius Valluvar had to have been to compose a text on such deep, devious methods of governance a thousand years ago?

He left after some more such scintillating conversation, choosing to disregard the astrologer’s kind offer of “stay the night and leave in the morning, will you not?”

“Another time, *Ayya*; I shall be your guest then,” he tempered the refusal with a concession.

“When next you visit, you shall have seen all my predictions come true,” the *jothidar* declared with a flourish.

“I’ll have to take that under advisement,” Vandhiyathevan grinned. “For—you haven’t exactly predicted anything, have you?” He leapt upon his horse with a chuckle, and was gone in a moment.

The road continued without diversion for a while beyond the astrologer’s home, and Vallavarayan realized that he was taking the same path as the palanquin. At one point, it split in two: one running north to the Kollidam while another snaked towards Thiruvaarur in the south-east. He craned his neck—to spot the palanquin like a speck, jogging steadily at the far end of the road—and felt his heart reel in turmoil.

Refusing the Kodumbalur princess’s request … had that been the right thing to do? What if she really did require aid—if danger should threaten her en route—could he ever forgive himself, if he came to know of her fate? *Wouldn’t I regret refusing help for years to come, in that case? And yet—my orders from the Mudhanmandhiri and Ilaiya Piratti are inflexible; unyielding; there’s simply neither place nor time to improvise; to veer away at a tangent. None of that, now; I’ve interfered—poked my nose as Azhwarkkadiyaan pointed out so eloquently—into*

affairs not my concern and floundered in a morass of trouble. Also—impossible to even dream of escorting Vanathi Devi right to the doorsteps of Choodamani Viharam.

Just as Vandhiyathevan cleared his thoughts and steered his stallion upon the Kollidam path, his sharp ears seemed to catch the fading echo of a scream: *Vheer!* Terrified, pleading, very faint—clearly feminine. Startled, he turned—to realize that the palanquin had vanished. It *might* have simply disappeared down a bend of the road, but wouldn't it be better to make sure? To think was to act; Vandhiyathevan came to a decision in an instant; he would investigate the situation. A slight delay would make no difference anyway.

He urged his horse into a gallop and was soon flying down the road like the wind, reaching the bend within moments. The scene that spread before his eyes made his heart skip several beats.

A woman was tied to a tree in rough-and-ready fashion, cloth stuffed into her mouth. The deepening twilight made it impossible to distinguish her features and he nudged his horse forward cautiously. Why—wasn't this Vanathi's companion, walking by the side of her palanquin? And here she was, moaning in distress, trying to squirm out of the ropes binding her.

Vandhiyathevan leapt down at once, yanking the cloth from her mouth before ripping away her ties—ties, his acute subconscious noted, that hadn't been tight in the first place.

"What happened here, woman? Go on, quick—where's the palanquin?" Vandhiyathevan almost panted with dread. "Your mistress—where's she?"

The maid spluttered and babbled, half her words lost in blubbering, terrified nonsense. Seven or eight men had sprung from behind a line of trees as soon as the palanquin turned the corner; some held skulls and *soolayudham* weapons. Two struck the maid's head, toppling her and then, stuffing her mouth with a cloth. By this time, the rest were growling horrifically to the bearers, who turned off the avenue and began to sprint along a narrow track, still carrying the palanquin, followed by the others. It was the maid who had screamed, for there had not been a sound from

Vanathi Devi—and she pointed a shaking hand towards the forest trail along which the palanquin had vanished.

"You'd better return to the Kudanthai astrologer's home, my girl, and stay safe," Vandhiyathevan delivered hurried instructions. "I'll do what I can to retrieve your mistress." And he leapt back on his horse, wheeling from the *rajapattai* onto the path. At a sharp kick from his master, that trusty animal bounded onto the track, flying over earth, bushes, foliage, pounding along a trail that crested and dipped into the earth.

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34

A Torch, Extinguished!

A*mavaasai*—the velvety blackness of a night yet young. Twilight had deepened, darkness flitting over the landscape on swift wings for the rumbling thunderclouds far north had spread out completely, obliterating what little light there was; not a single star could be glimpsed. *Minmini* insects fluttered above bushes, offering faint sparks of illumination and it was with their assistance that Vandhiyathevan progressed, spurring his hesitant horse forward. As to the purpose of such stumbling progress—where was he going and why; would he even find the object of his pursuit—that was a giant, yawning pit of uncertainty. All he knew was that Ilaiya Piratti's beloved friend was in danger, and he ought to strive tooth and nail to save her. For the rest—well, the good God above would provide.

But a whole *naazhigai* into this laborious quest and he had not seen the slightest sign of the palanquin; the faint suspicion that he'd perhaps engaged on a wild-goose chase could not but intrude. Vandhiyathevan reined in his horse—to hear the echo of some slight sound in the distance.

His ears pricked: were those hooves? Yes, that clip-clop—unmistakably a horse! One or many, though? Sentries, perhaps, in formation around the palanquin? Well, he certainly ought to be on his guard; it wouldn't do to canter forward and find himself mired within a large, hostile group. That would ruin his own plan, not to mention Vanathi Devi's cause.

Accordingly Vandhiyathevan inched forward, and determined at some point that there was just one horse ahead. Within awhile, it seemed to him that the animal had climbed to high ground—an embankment? Without wishing to be seen, he was seized with the desire to shadow and observe; he stared here and there—ah! A ruined *mandapam*, its walls crumbling. Vandhiyathevan assessed one side—it seemed perfect for his purpose; he nudged his mount to a halt behind it.

Next he stared through the darkness at the horse clambering upon the rise, eyes peeled so much that they ached with the strain. And then …

“Who’s there?”

The voice startled Vandhiyathevan—but strangely, sounded familiar.

“It is I, Maharaja—thy servant!” came an answer.

Within a minute, light flared behind a tree in the direction of the voices; a man emerged with a burning torch—illuminating a horse and its rider whose identity became clear the next instant: Madhuranthakar.

The man held aloft the light—and the stallion bearing its precious royal burden shied in fright, whirling around once, rearing forelegs in the air. The next instant—*sadaal*! It bolted.

Standing upon the embankment of a broad canal, when the horse hurtled forward, it was into the swift waters below.

“Maharaja!” The torch-bearer plunged into the canal himself, screaming. “Maharaja!” But alas, haste and horror did their work and he stumbled into the deluge; the torch was promptly snuffed out.

Darkness surrounded the region at once, deeper, far more intense—*kanaanthagaaram*, blackness impossible to pierce.

Droplets of water chose this precise moment to descend to earth—a faint drizzle began.

A chaotic jumble of sounds rose: the furious rustle of trees in the wind; the patter of rain upon the earth; the dry, parched croak of frogs upon the embankment and amidst all this, the terrified squawks of humans and the confused clip-clop of hooves.

That Prince Madhuranthakar’s royal repertoire did not include undaunted courage was a fact not lost on Vandhiyathevan. Could such a man control a terrified stallion, leaping about on canal banks? What *had* been his fate? Vallavarayan’s heart stuttered as he imagined the prince holding on for dear life, the horse careening all over unknown terrain, uphill and down vale—he could’ve pitched into the canal’s treacherous

waters—the stallion could've simply flung him somewhere, into a ditch perhaps, before bolting for good.

As for the torch-bearer, fat chance of him aiding his master, for hadn't he tumbled into the canal as well, extinguishing his torch in the process?

Now what was Vandhiyathevan to do? Did his duty lie with Vanathi, mysteriously vanished, palanquin and all, or Madhuranthakar, likely flailing in the water? His heart churned for a moment, weighing facts, possibilities and the respective outcomes—before coming to a decision.

The Kodumbalur princess had disappeared without a trace and beyond his reach, but Sembian Maadevi's son was here, right in front of his eyes and therefore, worth the effort of assistance. If he, Vandhiyathevan could just make sure that the prince was no longer in danger then, well—routing out Vanathi was a possibility that could always be explored. But—dear God, what of his precious, hard-fought decision of non-interference … and why was he embarking on a directly contradicting course now?

Vandhiyathevan discarded the protection of the wall and trotted out, carefully negotiating the uncertain ground, calling upon sharply honed instinct to guide him through the darkness and relentless drizzle towards the embankment, the last seen location of the prince's horse. Descending into the canal, he peered through the gloom—but could perceive nothing. Instead, a confused and frenzied blend of noises assaulted his ears: *Aaaah!—Ooooh!—Eeeeh!—Dadabadaa!—Dadabadaa!—Kadakadaa!—Kadakadaa!*

He steered his horse expertly through the waters and onto the opposite banks, straining to see beyond. Fields stretched away, crowded with rice plants; impossible to plunge through the clingy, muddy slush and lush saplings—no, he'd have to ride along the path hugging the fields.

But here, he was accosted by fresh difficulties: the uneven trail was choked with bushes and thorny plants—not that there was a choice; Vandhiyathevan pushed on, guiding his steed through the narrow, single

track. Driving rain above; slippery path below; a canal on one side; rice fields on the other and thorns, on top of all these.

The horse inched forward, step by gingerly step.

Time crept along, a minute as infinite as a *yugam*!

The gentle drizzle swelled to a torrent!

The darkness roiled ever deeper, even thicker.

And Vandhiyathevan descended into a reverie, mulling over recent events.

What on earth had Madhuranthakar been up to, riding alone? What was his destination—and who'd been the man awaiting him here?

Could there possibly be some connection between all this and Vanathi's abduction?

What indeed, was the Kodumbalur princess's fate?

And why oh, why must I embroil myself in this appalling tangle and gape, unwitting, at such a hopeless situation?

I might as well pursue my own affairs—find my way to the rajapattai and on to Kanchi!

Not that that's going to be easy either on such a pitch-black, soggy monsoon night—in which case, how may I conclude that everything happening here can have no connection to me?

Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar palace's secret plots and hushed conspiracies were no business of mine either—but witness the enormous good that came of poking my perfect nose into them! That aside, stumbling on a narrow, thorny trail along an overflowing canal in inky darkness can have no point—except to get soaked to the skin, of course. Not to mention the whole journey grinding to a halt if my horse breaks its legs on this potholed path.

There was no help for it: he'd have to return to the ruined *mandapam*, and resume his journey once this downpour trickled to a stop.

Lightning cut a jagged edge in the sky at just that instant—and in its brief, blinding flash Vandhiyathevan caught a glimpse of a horse upon the threshing platform in the distance. *Well, I've come this far*, he thought. *Why not continue and confirm the sighting? Also, you simply never knew; lending a hand during Madhuranthakar's distress might well help in the future.*

Vandhiyathevan steered his stallion from the trail onto the banks of the adjoining field, and towards the threshing platform which loomed ahead, large, dark and mysterious, not unlike a demon.

Another flash of lightning.

There—the horse!

That brief glimpse had been enough for Vandhiyathevan to realize that it was sans rider.

A crack of thunder!

The horse bolted again, perhaps shying at the deafening roars and flashes of lightning—clearly, there was no point in pursuit.

But Madhuranthakar—what if he'd fallen and was even now lying injured and helpless? "Who's there?" Vandhiyathevan called out more than once. "Anyone here?"

Jimjim!—*Rimrim!* burbled the rain steadily and his voice rose, loud and piercing, even drowning out the raucous downpour: "Who's there?"

But there was no response—none except his own question's empty echo from all four directions, mocking him: *Who's there? Who's there?*

The deluge showed no signs of easing; chill Vaadai winds cut like a knife, forcing the rain into a slant, sheering at skin. Vandhiyathevan's stallion shuddered; he himself, soaked in the downpour, was beginning to shiver from the biting cold.

He steered his steed back the way he'd come, convinced that there was no point in lingering in the fields—and berating himself for having indulged in such a pointless quest. *Stop getting into these ridiculous fixes*, he told himself severely. *And stick to your own business from now on, will you?*

His stallion, meanwhile, having picked its way out of sheer instinct, neighed gently, having reached its destination—which was when Vandhiyathevan, lost thus far in a muddled mental landscape, returned to mundane earth with a shake. He slipped off the horse, regarding his liberally dripping clothes ruefully; now, he'd been saddled with the task of drying them out. He peered through the gloom, wondering if the ruined *mandapam* possessed any section that might offer rudimentary shelter for him and his mount.

Imagine this if you will: walking into a freezing thunderstorm lashing the landscape, you suddenly step on a burning cinder … thus you may understand Vandhiyathevan's emotions at that precise moment. For he'd almost jumped out of his skin—not the result of a supernatural sighting or the wails of a terrifying apparition—but the clear, fluting call of a child.

"*Amma—Amma*?"

Still, one could hardly discount the presence of ghouls or ghosts—for a child, here? Within this dilapidated *mandapam*? *Chee*! *Do not conjure things that don't exist—spirits and demons are just the panicked imaginings of pathetic cowards*!

"*Amma*! *Amma* … hmm—hck," came the young voice again. God above! This was no ghost but a child; a live human child and these were its cries—the frightened, heaving sobs of a toddler bereft of his mother. *From a gloomy corner of this very mandapam too,* Vandhiyathevan worked out. Was it just the child—and no one else?

"*Amma*, hmm," drifted over the sobs, once more. "*Amma*!"

Vandhiyathevan approached the voice as close as he could, and cleared his throat. "Who's there?"

"Who's there?" returned a childish echo.

“Me, of course! Now, who’re you? What’re you doing in the dark? Come out, now.”

“But—it’s raining.”

“Rain’s stopped; come on.”

“Where’s my mother?”

“Gone to buy you milk.”

“You’re lying.”

“Are you coming out? Or shall I come to you?”

“I have a knife. I’ll stab you if you step in!”

“*Adeyappa*—how brave you are! So why not do it outside?”

“You’re not—you’re not a tiger, are you?”

“No, just a horse,” quipped Vandhiyathevan.

“Liar! Horses can’t speak, can they?”

“Neither can tigers, can they?”

“Amma said that there are tigers about and one might pounce on me if I came out.”

“I’m no tiger; nor will I pounce on you—don’t be scared.”

“Scared? Me? Why should I be scared?” And a child took small, hesitating steps from the depths of the dark *mandapam*. The downpour had finally eased; clouds had cleared a little and stars glowed faintly, little chinks of light here and there.

Vandhiyathevan gazed at the young one—couldn’t be more than four, he guessed, and even in the faint illumination, remarkably well-favoured, blessed with endearing features. Going by the scrap of silk at its waist and the necklace set with precious gems around its neck,

certainly highborn—now what was the mother about, leaving him here all alone? Why come here in the first place—and why leave without the child?

“You’re not a horse,” observed the youngster suddenly, having subjected Vandhiyathevan to careful scrutiny. “Why, you look like a man.”

“Who happens to possess a horse too,” Vallavarayan pointed to his mount.

“*Oho*, is that for me? But they said they’d bring a *pallakku*, didn’t they?”

A palanquin, eh? Vandhiyathevan’s mind raced with theories and conflicting questions that threatened to overpower his senses. Who was this child? Why was he here, all alone? And his spirited conversation—how astonishing that so young a boy should be without the slightest sign of terror! Also, who was it who’d spoken of sending him a *pallakku*? Why hadn’t it arrived, then? The woman who’d left him here—who was she? Where had she disappeared?

“Why has your mother left you, Child?” He asked the question uppermost in his mind.

The boy shook his head. “I was the one who left Amma behind.”

“Did you? Why?”

“I saw a horse running by and I wanted to catch it and ride on it but Amma wouldn’t let me so I ran away and she didn’t know and I wanted to find the horse and …” the boy took a deep breath. “Is this it?”

“No, this one’s different. Go on—how did you get here?”

“I couldn’t find the horse or Amma and then it started raining so I came into this *mandapam*.”

“Alone in the dark—you’re not the slightest bit afraid?”

“This is how I spend each day. Why would I be scared?”

“Not even of tigers?”

“It’s Amma who worries about those. I’m a fish, see—and I can gobble tigers!”

“*Ade*, where’s the fish that can do that?”

“Not just any fish—I’m huge—a giant, *magara* fish—a whale! I can swallow tigers, lions and even elephants—”

Vandhiyathevan stared at the boy, mind in a veritable ferment of extraordinary conjectures. A fish capable of swallowing tigers—what a very unusual, bizarre idea! And yet, someone had clearly taught the child all this; who, and why?

“What’s that noise over there?” The child pointed.

Vandhiyathevan turned and peered—to see a crowd approaching from a distance, holding aloft several burning torches, a palanquin in its midst and every member, it seemed, in the grip of nervous dread, especially a female hurrying forward. “Over there!”—“Here! —“Where?”—“Here!” Shouts arose, chaotic and confused as voices blended together.

A man pointed towards the *mandapam*—and lo, behold! The entire posse began to pelt towards the crumbling structure.

“Well, here they are with the *pallakku*,” the boy commented in matter-of-fact fashion. “But I don’t want to get into it—will you take me on your horse?”

Vandhiyathevan gazed raptly at the child, rather taken by his charming face, beguiling expression, imperious but somehow, fascinating speech—in fact, he felt a strong impulse to fold the youngster in an embrace and hold him in his arms and yet … something, some odd instinct placed an invisible barrier in his mind. “I’ve other things to do—urgent things,” he said, finally.

“Where do you go?”

“Kanchi.”

“That’s where my *sathru* lives—my great enemy!”

Vandhiyathevan almost jumped out of skin. *This is all wrong—I oughtn’t to be here, standing right next to this boy,* he thought, worried. But no—there was no time to leap onto his horse and escape; the posse was almost upon them; scampering at this point would raise exactly the kind of suspicion he most wished to avoid. And if he wished to admit it to himself, a flicker of curiosity had sparked to life: what was about to happen next? There was only one way to find out: he tiptoed into the darkness, sidled behind one crumbling wall and peered out with the liveliest interest.

“Here I am!” The child went forward and one of the group—the woman at the forefront who was now heaving with exertion—practically leapt up and enveloped him in a crushing embrace, regardless.

“How could you do this, Pandiya?” She demanded, sobbing with relief, and a man stepped from behind her: Ravidasan.

“You’ve scared us all roundly, Chakravarthy,” the *mandhiravadhi* strode up to the boy.

“Why not?”The child gurgled merrily. “I asked for a horse, but you’ve only brought a *pallakku*!”

Our old acquaintances Soman Saambavan, Idumbankaari and Devaralan among others now crowded around the boy. “Not just one but a thousand, ten thousand stallions shall be lined up for your edification but pray, oblige us now by getting into the palanquin,” pleaded Soman Saambavan.

“No!” The child snapped. “I’ll come, but only on that horse.” And he pointed unerringly to the wall.

It was only then that the band noticed the stallion—and by association Vandhiyathevan, obscured by pitch darkness; silent observers.

Predictably, it was Ravidasan who came to his senses first; his pleasant expression dissolving into a mask of astonishment, sheer panic

and deep, twisted fury. “You—you demon!” And he took a couple of hasty steps forward. “How did you get here?”

“You ghoul from Kodikkarai,” Vandhiyathevan shot back smartly. “How did *you* get here?”

“*Ahaha*,” Ravidasan burst into laughter. “You really were fooled, weren’t you?”

“Some turn into ghouls once they’re dead,” Vandhiyathevan shrugged. “You’ve become one even while alive.”

“Don’t quarrel with him,” the child ordered imperiously. “I like him a lot. He kept me company in the darkness. He said he’d kill a tiger if it came close. He can come with us.”

“Your every wish is our command,” Ravidasan said smoothly, walking up to the boy. “But now, you must oblige us just this once and climb into the palanquin.”

The child heaved a much put upon sigh, but promptly walked towards the hated *pallakku*.

“Well?” Ravidasan sidled up to Vandhiyathevan. “What’re your intentions now?”

“I was hoping to know yours, rather.”

“Come with us. There’s not much you don’t know of our secrets, after all—and now you know more. We can’t possibly leave you here, so just come.”

“And if I refuse …?”

“Impossible. You’re quite a daredevil I know, but we number twenty; there’s no way you can get away.”

“No way I can get away alive, you mean.”

“Youth calls to you—and as yet, you’ve experienced precious little of its pleasures, haven’t you? Why sacrifice your life in vain, then?”

“I know of no one who would. Speaking of accompanying you, where? What’s your destination?”

“Ha, *now* you’re talking! The Young Queen of Pazhuvoor, of course.”

“My guess was correct, then—but where’s she stationed today?”

“Likely arrived at Thiruppurambiyam, by now. As for you—well? Coming with us? Yes or no?”

“To tell the truth, my way cuts across that part of the world and I was worried about the lack of a guide—what a stroke of luck that you’re all here!” Vandhiyathevan grinned. “Coming?”

The child having climbed in, the palanquin began to jog forward; Ravidasan’s posse surrounded it and marched along, holding aloft lit torches and raising various chants. Vandhiyathevan accompanied them, heart churning with conflicting emotions.

What was Vanathi’s fate? He didn’t know. Madhuranthakar? He didn’t know. And what of his own eventual fate this night? He didn’t know that either.

But there *was* a glimmering of awareness that he was about to witness something phenomenal at the end of this journey—a conspiracy that would beat everything he’d seen so far; even the midnight meeting at the Kadambur palace. So much for the better, then—but what would come later? *Will I be allowed to leave alive? No; they’re certain to press me to join their cause. My refusal would mean execution. But stay—there might be a reprieve—if Nandhini would intercede again …*

Vandhiyathevan could not help but marvel at how quickly Ravidasan’s very mention of the Ilaiya Rani had influenced his decision to accompany the group—ha! Was this what elders had meant by *maayai*, the lure of illusion and *moham*, the leaping flame of desire?

She, Vandhiyathevan knew, was engaged in the most devious plots; the most treacherous conspiracies—and yet, the faintest chance of a meeting and his heart leapt in anticipation, yearning to see her just once despite all cautionary impulses. *Coming*? His lips had closed the deal

even before his heart had processed the possibility. But then, what choice had he, really? Ravidasan was right; there could be no battling all these men but if he played along, an avenue might open up; a ruse to escape might occur, perhaps. Besides, he could learn more about these deceitful devils and their cunning schemes—in fact, it was his bounden duty.

Kanchi? That's where my sathru lives—my great enemy! The child's enthusiastic lisp rang in Vandhiyathevan's ears, time and again. Who *was* this boy? And why did this band address him *Chakravarthy* with such respect? Who was the boy's *sathru*, as he'd spat so vehemently?

Truth be told, Vandhiyathevan had rather guessed the possible answers—and his panic skyrocketed as he realized the implications. Good God, when was all this going to end? *Soon*; v*ery soon*, whispered a voice in his heart.

And so it went on and on, this unusual procession, progressing along fields, canals, banks, copses and clearings, cresting and dipping along tracks; crossing the full waters of River Manni; arriving at the borders of the Thiruppurambiyam—and then, finally, entering the abundant forest that surrounded the ancient memorial.

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35
“The hour is nigh!”

Ah, we’re no strangers to this crumbling, dilapidated ruin shrouded by encroaching jungle; resplendent more than a hundred years ago but now a mere shadow; its once glorious façade an empty shell—wasn’t it here that Azhwarkkadiyaan had the first horrifying glimmerings of Ravidasan and his cohorts’ devious conspiracies? And having arrived in company of the rest, Vandhiyathevan now found himself and his horse gradually sidled by the side of a tumbled down wall that had once been part of the ruined memorial.

“You’d do well to wait awhile, *Appane*,” came sage words of warning. “The summons shall come at a suitable moment. As for escape—cast all such ridiculous fantasies out of your mind; only those familiar with this forest can enter and exit at will—try the same and you’ll lose your life,” Ravidasan crowed.

“Failing which you’ll cast a spell and turn me into a corpse, I suppose,” Vandhiyathevan quipped. “I’m right, aren’t I?” He demanded with a grin.

“Find all this amusing, do you? Laugh, then,” And Ravidasan cackled, himself. “Laugh all you want!”

A jackal chose that precise moment to raise a long, mournful howl; an owl joined the chorus with a choked moan. Vandhiyathevan shivered despite himself, well aware that his current unease was nothing to do with the weather. The very Vaadai winds seemed to hesitate from entering that dense jungle—why, not even the rain appeared to have penetrated its gloomy depths; a few bald spots here and there seemed the only evidence of persistent raindrops. The lack of wind meant an atmosphere so stifling that Vandhiyathevan’s dripping lower garments were already dry; only the tightly curled waistcloth stayed wet. He spread it on a boulder nearby and subsided on its edge, leaning against the

conveniently placed *pallippadai* wall. A lone man stood by, obviously performing sentry duty.

The others of the party had arranged themselves into a circle in a small, natural clearing at a little distance. One hauled forward an old throne from within the memorial, upon which the boy referred to as Chakravarthy was urged to take his seat. The burning torches were extinguished barring just two, and thick cloying smoke pervaded the area for a while.

“The Queen isn’t here yet,” remarked one of the men.

“There’s a time for everything,” Soman Saambavan explained curtly. “Besides, I’ve instructed her to arrive during the second *jaamam*. Meanwhile,” he looked around. “A session wouldn’t be amiss—surely someone could sing the glories of the Vazhudi clan?”

Idumbankaari produced a small *udukku* and began a slow rhythmic beat; the Devaralan took up some sort of song.

Vandhiyathevan, sitting apart, watching and listening to these goings-on had recognized right away that the so-called Vazhudis were none other than the Pandiyas. The music fell upon his ears—a sort of mournful, grieving lament; the mellow beat and sorrowful notes settling heavily inside him in a way that melted his heart. Stray words assaulted his ears and from them, he gathered the gist; memory surfaced of a legend—the massive war that had occurred on this very site, an hundred years ago.

Indeed, it was here that grievous battle enjoined between Varaguna Pandiyan and Aparijtha Pallavan—battle that endured for three long, torturous days. The Ganga king Prithvipathi, a staunch Pallava ally, had shared the fate of hundreds of thousands of brave soldiers that day—a warrior’s glorious, noble death. And it was here, the memorial erected upon the site of his demise that conspirators had gathered, choosing his final resting place as the hotbed of their devious plots.

The Pallava armies had begun to scatter pell-mell upon Prithvipathi’s death; victory for the Pandiyas, it seemed, was assured. It was at this opportune moment that allies arrived to shore up the

weakening Pallava defenses lead by the inimitable Vijayalaya Chozhan, proud bearer of ninety-six peerless war wounds. Four muscled men bore this extraordinary veteran upon their shoulders for he had lost the use of his legs—not that this deterred him for he promptly plunged into the heaving, twisting mass of Pandiya men, twirling two massive broadswords. The blades swung in slick, vicious circles slashing through flesh and bone—and within moments, corpses fell in mounds on both sides of the sword's victorious path.

Pallava warriors, hitherto retreating in panic, glimpsed this marvelous occurrence and began to regroup, making a tentative return to the field.

Jana jana jana janaar!—An hundred swords rose into the evening sky, their sharpened blades dazzling against the golden evening sun!

Dana dana dana danaar!—Ten thousand spears sprang forward from another direction, light glancing off their points and blinding the eye!

Swords and spears clashed furiously!

A thousand, ten thousand heads leapt off shoulders, rolling in all directions!

A thousand, ten thousand lifeless, headless corpses thudded to the bloody battlefield!

Eeeee!—neighed terrified horses as they thrashed in death throes.

Pleeiii!—trumpeted elephants as they plunged amongst milling men, finally dying in agony.

Bodies of men and beasts alike were washed about in a welter of sticky, slimy bloodbath.

More than twenty thousand vultures shrieked in the skies, obliterating the sun as they whirred around the battlefield for a feast of the dead.

Thirty thousand jackals jostled and crowded around the killing fields, slavering at their mouths for a taste of mutilated flesh!

“*Ayyo*—*Ayyo*!” quavered fifty thousand petrified, agonized voices all at once.

“Seize them—don’t let go—run!—Kill!—Chop!” bellowed a hundred thousand throats.

“Hack!—Kill—*Hadham!*” throbbed ten thousand victory drums in a glorious frenzy of conquest.

Boom!—*Boom*!—*Boom*! Echoed twenty thousand massive conches.

Ha-ha-ha-ha! Cackled sixty thousand ghouls, at the destruction.

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Vandhiyathevan jerked awake and stared around, wide-eyed—realizing a moment later that he had dozed off against the memorial’s wall. His dazed mind tried to recapture the terrifyingly vivid nightmare in a state of half consciousness—had it indeed been just the product of an overactive imagination? No—not all of it; doubtless the Devaralan’s dramatically descriptive song accompanied by the eerie, surreal beat of an *udukku* had conjured up the raw, very real events of a century ago, in his fertile brain.

The Devaralan’s verses, he noted, were now retailing with relish the retreat of the Pallava and Ganga hordes before the Pandiya onslaught; the loud, raucous cackles at the plight of those long ago enemies must have mutated into the ghoulish laughter of his nightmare that ripped him out of sleep, Vandhiyathevan decided.

Abruptly, the *udukku*’s steady beat stopped; so did the Devaralan’s song.

The flickering light of a lone torch in the distance—closer, closer and behind it lumbered a palanquin. The bearers set it down; the curtains rustled and a lady stepped out. A lady none other than Pazhuvoor’s Ilaiya Rani Nandhini Devi but unlike Vandhiyathevan’s previous awed glimpses of her, when she had been dripping in intricate jewellery, wrapped in fine silks, a veritable *mohini*, the very temptress of beauty—now, with her hair flung loose and devoid of ornamentation, her mien was

that of an austere, severe ascetic; a harsh, immovable Goddess Durga Devi holding her wrath in check. Vandhiyathevan, watching her graceful descent, felt a sudden pang of sheer panic; his body shivered against his will.

Nandhini's gaze, the moment she stepped down from her palanquin, alighted upon the boy on the *simmasanam*; she took each step forward, her beautiful eyes fastened upon him and the boy was similarly occupied. The others watched the lady and child, attention breathlessly riveted upon both.

The woman who had escorted the child to the ruined *mandapam*—addressed by him as *Amma*—was now behind the throne. Nandhini, finally in front of the boy, stretched out two slender arms; the child stared at her and then the woman, by turns.

"*You're* my mother, aren't you?" He demanded of the Rani. "Not this one?"

"Indeed *Kanmani*, my darling."

"Why does she call herself my mother, then?"

"She's the one who raised you."

"Why didn't *you*? Why don't you keep me with you? Why does this woman hide me away in some mountain cave far away?"

"To honour your dear father's wishes, darling—and to avenge his death by revenging ourselves on his murderers!"

"Oh—I do know about that," remarked the boy knowledgeably as he slipped off the throne and toddled towards her.

Nandhini wrapped her arms around the child, raised him into a warm embrace, and bestowed a kiss upon his head. He clutched her tight as well—perhaps his childish mind realized that she would release him soon and so, subconsciously tried to avoid it as much as he could.

The scene did not last, however; the Ilaiya Rani practically pried away his delicate fingers and disengaged herself, bundling the child back

on the throne. She returned to the palanquin and retrieved an ornate sword—one that we have seen before—and made some sort of sign to the bearers, who promptly picked up the palanquin, retreated into the foliage and crouched, half-hidden, to wait.

Nandhini returned to the *simmasanam* and placed the sword carefully across the seat.

“May I touch it?” demanded the boy, eagerness obvious as his eyes devoured the beautifully fashioned weapon.

“Patience, *Kanmani*; wait just a while,” Nandhini soothed as she turned her attention from the child. Her eyes rested speculatively on Ravidasan and his cohorts, each man passing under careful scrutiny. “There’s no one here except those sworn to the cause?” She asked, finally.

“Certainly not, *Devi*,” assured Soman Saambavan.

“Senathipathi,” Nandhini began, addressing Ravidasan who snorted with amusement.

“You may well laugh now,”’ she continued, not fazed in the slightest. “By this time, next month, though—who can know?”

“And we have waited endlessly for just such a wonderful day, *Devi*, as you well know.”

“Our numbers are very few, *Ayya*, and our Chakravarthy a mere child. The Chozhas, however, are at the zenith of power; their armies endless and their empire vast. All our carefully crafted plans might have crumbled to nothing had we acted in haste. But patience brings its own reward for our plans are about to attain completion. And now, Ravidasar —is there anything you wish to say—does anyone, in fact?”

The *mandhiravadhi*’s eyes raked the faces of those gathered, but all seemed to have suddenly resolved upon a vow of silence for not one spoke. “The honour of speech belongs to you by right, *Devi*, and not us,” he conceded with a flourish. “A moment ago, you mentioned that our mission was about to reach completion. I must beg you, on all our behalf,

to grace us with the details of where it is to reach fruition; how—and by whom, your highness."

"Such indeed was my intention when I agreed to a meeting here—and summoned you all without fail," Nandhini replied. "Not to mention our beloved Chakravarthy as well."

Her audience, including the child on the throne, stared at her without a blink and she, satisfied with their barely concealed anticipation, continued.

"Some of you were gripped by haste, I remember," her dulcet tones teased the gathering. "While others dared to entertain suspicions about my commitment to our sacred cause. The unmitigated gall of it! For I, more than any of you here have reason to remember the past; to ensure that every incident is carved indelibly in my heart. No, I haven't forgotten—there is nothing that has occupied my thoughts to the exclusion of everything else, morning, noon and night and every moment in between, for the last three years. Nothing but the ways and means, ruses and strategies that might help advance our cause; aid its completion, and achieve success. Every person I met; every conversation I made and each task I've undertaken so far has been with one and only one purpose: our mission, and the vain hope that everything I do might somehow bring us closer to its successful fulfillment. And now—at last, I see light at the end of the tunnel; the hour, it seems, draws near, for the lords, chiefs and *peruntharam* officers of Chozha Nadu find themselves ranged on opposite sides. Pazhuvettarayar; Sambuvaraiyar and several others have made Madhuranthakan their imperial candidate and are eager even now to crown him, while Kodumbalur Boodhi Vikrama Kesari and Thirukkovilur Malayaman oppose the scheme tooth and nail. News has reached me that Boodhi Vikrama Kesari marches towards Thanjai even as we speak, at the head of the Southern Chozha Forces while Malayaman is no slouch either, gathering forces in his turn; war may erupt between these two factions at any moment—"

"A war that, we've heard, you're at great pains to halt, *Devi*," came a smooth interruption. "Straining every nerve to negotiate a truce, in fact, at Sambuvaraiyan's palace in Kadambur."

“I’ve certainly no compunction in admitting this claim—you couldn’t possibly guess my motives, I suppose?”

“There, we had to admit defeat, *Devi*, for have our elders not said—and rightly too—that none, not even the divine Sarveswaran can plumb the unimaginable depths of a woman’s heart? How, then, could we?”

“Obviously not. Very well, I shall put you out of misery and reveal all: I needn’t elaborate, I think, on the consequences of a civil war within Chozha Nadu before our own mission has reached completion. Sundara Chozhan lives still and there’s that devious Aniruddha Brammaraayan as well—interfering busybodies entirely capable of stifling the two factions butting heads. Not that our cause would succeed should, by any chance, one side alone triumph; we would be certain to face defeat then as well. This explains the reason for my efforts at truce, now: our task has to be accomplished before war breaks out for good—to which there would be no end, naturally, once our mission is complete; both sides would annihilate each other before long … which brings us to the peace talks: *now* do you understand my motives?”

Judging by the marked approval and enthusiasm lighting up their hitherto gloomy features, her audience had been carried away by this masterly peroration; pleased murmurs arose, clearly in praise of the Ilaiya Rani’s superior intellect and keen strategy.

Not even Ravidasan was exempt from the general feeling of euphoria. “We cannot but be astonished at your highness’s remarkable forethought—and your motivation behind the so-called truce now makes much sense to us. But you mentioned that the hour of fulfillment was nearing every moment; that our cause would reach completion very soon—how is that to happen? By whose aid, and when?”

“Patience, and you shall realize that my strategy allows for all these questions. An official invitation has been issued to our primary foe towards negotiating peace in Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar’s palace; make no mistake, for he will come. Our mission must, of necessity, be accomplished there. *Abathudhavis*, sworn to avenge the death of Veera Pandiya Chakravarthy! Hark, for the hour is nigh—the time for vengeance is come at last, for today is Sani, is it not? Our cause shall attain superb completion this very day, next week!”

“***Aha***!” rose a loud, concerted shout of jubilation from twenty throats; some jumped about for sheer joy while Idumbankaari thwacked his *udukku* twice with enthusiasm. Owls roosting high in the trees grumbled into wakefulness at the interruption and flapped to other branches; bats rustled and beat their wings as they shrieked into the night; even Vandhiyathevan’s horse shifted with a nervous neigh.

The Vaanar warrior, peering through the gloom, could only guess at the reason for the uproar: clearly Nandhini had imparted some news that had energized the whole gathering. What this could have been, though, he had no idea for not a word had reached his ears.

Having slackened his hold over the audience, Ravidasan allowed sufficient interval and gathered the reins of control once more, settling everyone down. “Your last words fill us with inexplicable delight, *Devi*,” he began smoothly. “To know that our vengeance upon our greatest foe is so near at hand—ah, what joy! But kindly grace us with just one more detail, we pray: whose is to be the great good fortune of fulfilling our mission?”

“I suppose it’s only natural that there be competition amongst us for the honour—hence my decision to have Veera Pandiyar’s beloved, precious son, Kumara Chakravarthy brought here; that a choice may be made without recourse to resentment. Here is our martyred emperor’s celebrated sword as well; this precious infant must raise his father’s weapon and whosoever has the good fortune to receive it from his hands will avenge our foe. The rest must stand by for aid in every possible way; should the assigned person fail the task for some reason, others must step into the breach. I, as you all know, will reside within the Kadambur palace while Idumbankaari shall be one of the guards at the fortress gates; the two of us shall do all we can to bring in those sworn to the cause. These plans meet with your approval, I assume?”

From the eager, avid glances traded by her audience, they certainly did.

“Your schemes have indeed been laid meticulously,” Ravidasan admitted gracefully. “And doubtless, this gathering approves. There is one stipulation I would wish made, here and now: each one of us here must submit unconditionally and irrevocably to the commands of the one

tasked with this mission. They must also, further, surrender themselves, body, heart and soul to any and every diktat issued by the Chosen One, until the Chakravarthy comes of age."

A faint, knowing smile played across Nandhini's lips. "A stipulation that applies to me as well, I presume?"

"There can be no exceptions, *Devi*."

"Excellent. I understand that everyone here accepts this rule of Ravidasar's, as well?" And Nandhini's eyes swept across the assemblage.

The men stared at one other, plainly reluctant to answer; some, it seemed, did not quite approve of such a wholesale clause.

"But—how can that be?" objected Soman Saambavan. "To bind our Devi, our peerless Queen who has been the means of accomplishing all our dreams—is it fair to force such a condition upon her?"

"Touching, but your concern is quite unnecessary; I live and breathe for one purpose only: avenging the bloody murder of Veera Pandiya Chakravarthy—and whosoever accomplishes that venerable, divine task is worthy of my devotion forever." Then, she turned her attention to the bewildered child on the throne, watching the proceedings wide-eyed, with very little comprehension. "*Kanmani*, this celestial sword was once your sacred father's deadly weapon. You may place it in the hands of the person you like the most, here. Come now."

Ravidasan took a step forward. "Now look carefully at us all, Chakravarthy," his voice was a low, gravelly rumble. "You shall give that sword, the blessed treasure of Pandiya dynasty into the hands of whichever of us seems a great warrior to you—the bravest!"

The infant emperor, seated in state upon the throne, stared around; dozens of eyes—bright, eager eyes drenched with frenzied anticipation devoured his innocent face; each begged and pleaded with him: *I am the right choice; give it to me—me, please!*

Ravidasan seemed an exception here, once again: *Give it to me!* his stark eyes and severe face seemed to command; almost threaten.

The boy peered at the assembly twice or thrice and then, finally, curled his tender fingers around the heavy weapon, staggering as he struggled to raise it.

The gathering's eagerness rose to fever pitch; the time had come. *Now, any moment now*—!

The boy turned towards Nandhini in one brisk movement. "I like you best out of everyone here, *Amma*. You must rule my kingdom until I've grown up."

And he thrust Veera Pandiyar's sacred sword into her slender hands.

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36
Delusions in the Dark

Nandhini received the ceremonial sword from the child addressed as Chakravarthy, and clasped it lovingly to her breast. Then she lifted the boy, crushing him in a hug. Tears streamed down her cheeks without pause.

The men observed the scene for a while, bemused—until one suddenly returned to earth; the first to be released from a sense of incredulity: characteristically, Ravidasan. “I’m afraid our noble emperor hasn’t quite understood our humble request,” he put forward with a creditable assumption of humility. “Clearly, he’s handed you the sword without quite being aware of what was asked of him and so, we ought to explain—”

“Not at all, *Ayya*,” Nandhini interrupted him, her voice husky with emotion. “The Chakravarthy’s understanding of the situation cannot be faulted in the least. Do not be apprehensive at my emotion, all of you,” she gazed at her audience. “These are but tears of ecstasy at having been chosen to avenge our Veera Pandiya Chakravarthy!”

“But pray, consider, *Devi*,” urged Soman Saambavan. “Surely, with so many of us *Abathudhavis* present—”

“There’s no need to consider anything, for this sacred responsibility is mine and mine alone,” she put out a hand again, halting his objections. “But stay—the rest of you will not be without work to do: half this gathering must escort the emperor to the safety of the Pancha Pandavar Hills; the rest must journey to Kadambur. Those who can must enter the fort; the rest may wait outside. Make sure you possess swift horses—as many of us as possible ought to escape the fort alive, surely, when the deed is done?”

“Forgive me, *Ammani*—but I’ve been most remiss in forgetting an important matter,” Ravidasan stepped forward at this juncture.

“Permission to reveal it?”

“Speak then—quickly,” Nandhini said in clipped tones. “Pazhuvettarayar is attending the Kaalamukar Mahasangam on the banks of the Kollidam, and I must return to the palace before he does.”

“There can be no doubt of our first foe Aditha Karikalan’s arrival at Sambuvaraiyan’s palace in Kadambur—or so you asserted, a while ago,” Ravidasan murmured. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Aren’t you? Explain your reasons.”

“Of which I have plenty: an *olai* is on its way to him as we speak, urging him not to visit Kadambur on any account. One needn’t wonder about the senders: Pazhaiyarai Ilaiya Piratti and Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar, of course—”

“Think I know nothing of these developments, do you?”

“Still expect him to make an appearance in Kadambur, do you?”

“Indeed, for neither that Pazhaiyarai cobra nor the Anbil demon knows the complexities of his nature—not even you, skilled in spells and magic. Aditha Karikalar, you see, is a twisted bundle of contradictions: forbid him a task, and that is the first he will undertake. I know this facet of his personality well—very well, indeed. He’s no Arulmozhi Varman, a willing child easily led; nor Madhuranthakan, quaking with terror at everything. An *olai* from his beloved sister, and the Chief Minister urging him against a visit will be the very factors that ensure his presence in Kadambur,” Nandhini finished with a knowing smile.

“Nevertheless, you’d do well to mistrust this—bundle of contradictions,” Ravidasan smirked. “For their *olai* shall never reach Kanchi.”

“No? Why do you say so, *Ayya*?” Nandhini’s voice was laced with barely concealed haste. “Make your meaning clear, if you please!”

“Certainly, *Devi*—just one question more,” Ravidasan practically purred. “Would you also be aware of the identity of the messenger? The one who carries such cautionary tidings to Aditha Karikalan?”

“Not absolutely—but I can make an educated guess.”

“Unnecessary, *Devi*, for we’ve captured him; he was skulking in the very *mandapam* our Chakravarthy had sheltered in, from the rain. All our secrets are now in his possession; leaving him alive would be to usher in our own complete and utter ruin. Idumbankaari,” Ravidasan turned, and barked a command. “Where’s that spy—bring him forward!”

Idumbankaari plunged towards the *pallippadai* temple in company of two men; Nandhini stared in their direction. Her eyes, hard and speculative thus far, abruptly lost their severity. The seductive smile of old played on her lips, her face luminous again in its beauty.

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The Pandiyan *Abathudhavis* approached Vandhiyathevan—who leant against the wall, half asleep with sheer boredom and exhaustion—and pounced on him without warning.

The Vaanar warrior, having briefly considered a ferocious wrestle to prove his strength, discarded it in favour of curiosity: what on earth were their intentions? He stayed still, therefore, submitting with uncharacteristic docility to their rough-and-ready trussing up of his hands and body with a large rope, and practically a shove by the shoulders into Nandhini’s presence.

Vandhiyathevan flashed a cheeky grin at the Ilaiya Rani whose face, however, reflected no change whatsoever; her features shone now with a serene radiance. “Once again, *Ayya*—” she began, before he cut in brazenly.

“As you see, *Devi*, I stand in front of you again—but not of my own volition, I guarantee,” and he cast an impudent glance at the men around him.

“*Amma*,” the child standing by Nandhini tugged at her hand. “This man saved me from being gobbled by a ghoul in the dark!” He frowned adorably. “But why’s he tied up, now?”

“Quiet, Child,” Vandhiyathevan counseled the youngster. “Babes should mind their manners and not speak out of turn before their elders —or a tiger will swallow you whole.”

“Oh? But I’ll gobble it!” quipped the boy.

“Which fish can ever swallow a tiger?” Vandhiyathevan riposted.

A low, terrifying growl escaped the throats of the men around him—a rumble that made his hairs stand on end, quaking even his nonchalant heart for a moment.

“Hear that, *Devi*?” Ravidasan’s voice rose with outrage. “There can be no releasing him, now. Your preference was the only reason we did so twice before—but not anymore; not now.”

“Good God, *Mandhiravadhi*—how you do lie, to be sure,” Vandhiyathevan’s mouth formed an *O* of well-feigned astonishment. “You, to let me live—wasn’t it the other way around? Have a care with this magician *Devi*: is it indeed Ravidasan in the flesh? Or his ghost?”

“Ah, I’m a ghoul indeed,” Ravidasan gave an uproarious, terrifying crack of laughter. “And today, I shall drink deep of your treacherous blood!”

Again that rumbling, horrifying growl from the gathering; the air sizzled with hostility.

“*Amma*,” said the boy insistently, to Nandhini. “This man has a good horse. Tell him to give it to me!”

“Wouldn’t you like to come with me, Child?” Vandhiyathevan wheedled. “I shall let you ride my stallion, you know …”

“*Adei*, shut your trap!” Ravidasan barked, his wrathful eyes boring through the warrior, before turning to Nandhini. “Command us at once, *Devi*—”

“How on earth did he get here?” The Ilaiya Rani’s voice was the very epitome of tranquility. “And when?”

“This demon, this devious spy tried to kidnap our beloved Chakravarthy from the very *mandapam* he’d sheltered in, and tried to escape—thankfully, we arrived just in time to prevent it. A moment more and catastrophe would’ve ruined us all,” Ravidasan finished with a great deal of feeling.

“Is all this true, *Ayya*?” Nandhini asked.

“Only you can know whether your people are a truthful bunch as a whole, *Devi*,” Vandhiyathevan quipped. “I cannot, can I?”

Nandhini’s smile vanished in a flash. “Step aside, all of you,” she addressed Ravidasan. “I feel the need to interrogate this person regarding a few matters.”

“Time flies as we speak, *Devi*; dangers threatens us every moment. Now, of all times—”

Before Ravidasan could finish, Nandhini interjected in a stern voice. “Remember the stipulations of just a while ago; conditions we agreed upon, I might add. Not a word more—move, and kindly take the Chakravarthy with you.” She bent to murmur in the boy’s ears. “Do go with them for awhile, Kumara. I shall get this man’s horse for you.”

In some haste, Ravidasan led the child and the rest apart without another word of protest.

Left alone, Nandhini’s beautiful eyes pierced Vandhiyathevan, in the flickering light of torches. “There seems a bond between us, *Ayya*,” she said, slowly.

“A bond that’s proving rather dangerous, *Devi*—and not a little cumbersome, to tell the truth,” Vandhiyathevan quipped. “Do observe how it constricts my body and arms.”

“Cease your thoughtless banter for a moment. Now, a straight answer, if you will: did you come on purpose? Or was your arrival an accident?”

“Neither, *Devi*; your men practically bundled me here—with a good deal of violence, I might add. Else, I might’ve reached the banks of the

Kollidam by now."

"Your acute unease in my presence is apparent, *Ayya*, as is your intense eagerness to leave me."

"I suffer no discomfort, *Devi*; rather, grief at having to remove myself from your gracious presence. Forgive my presumption, but you seem to suffer the attentions of two insufferable men: Pazhuvettarayar, that old bat, and this devious magician. Say the word—just a word—and I shall secure your release—"

"And take me where, exactly?"

"Your mother, who roams the jungles of Ilankai like an orphan," Vandhiyathevan offered without batting an eyelid.

A long, deep sigh of intense disappointment, and Nandhini raised her eyes to meet his. "So I can wander as well—another orphan to keep her company? Not that that's inconceivable; such a time may come, no matter our schemes, and then—I shall seek your help myself. Before then, however, I harbour a mission that requires fulfillment. Will you help me?"

"How may I, *Ammani*, unless I have some knowledge of your secret ambition?" Vandhiyathevan hedged.

"The truly affectionate will not bargain for explanations *Ayya*, rather, offering assistance without trying to dredge as many details as possible beforehand."

"And yet, those prompted by that selfsame affection shall sometimes try to caution, and effect a timely rescue from danger, *Ammani*. Pray, listen: these devious devils have cozened you somehow into falling in with them; they've ensnared you into their plots, and seek to use you for their own selfish aims …"

"Far from it: it is I who wish to use them for my own purposes. You'd do well to understand that."

"Turning your head by dragging a poor, pitiful child from some God-forsaken hellhole and—"

“Know the purpose of that boy’s existence, do you?”

“Plunk him on the Pandiya throne and crown him king, I suppose …”

“Wrong again. It isn’t just the Pandiya throne that he will inherit, but a far greater one: the seat that governs the vast Chozha *samrajyam* stretching from River Thungabhadhra to the southern reaches of Ilankai …”

“*Ammamma*! A glorious quest indeed—and whose assistance shall you claim as you march on the path to such illustrious heights? That herd of jackals, sniffing and snorting over there? Shall you vanquish the overwhelming power of a Chozha army numbering twenty lakh brave warriors with a pack of ten or twenty jackals that cower in lairs by day, and prowl around only by night?”

“Not at all. My ambition is nurtured by another, far greater power: the sword in my own hands. My mission shall reach magnificent completion with its loyal assistance.”

“You shall never use that weapon, *Ammani*, for the power to wield it exists neither in your hand, nor your heart.”

“What makes you say so?”

“Instinct, I should think.”

“An instinct that shall be proven wrong here and now!”

“Then I’d be fortunate indeed, to die at your gracious hands.” And Vandhiyathevan bent his neck, staring at the ground as though awaiting a blade at his nape any moment.

“You’d seek death at my gracious hands, would you?” Nandhini smiled a little. “Rather than be crowned king?”

Vandhiyathevan raised his head to stare at her. “Exactly how many men do you intend to crown with the single coronet in your possession?”

“That is my prerogative and mine alone. In the end, I shall crown whomsoever I choose.”

“What about the fate of that naïve child, then?”

“That is my prerogative too, isn’t it—his place on the throne, or otherwise?”

A deep sigh. “You may do as your heart dictates, *Devi*—all I know is that I do not want what you offer.”

“Don’t you? Why not?”

“Let me tell you that the praise I’ve received from various quarters about the irresistible charms of the curly hair clustering upon my head is not inconsiderable. Why would I ruin such rare, unlooked-for beauty by stuffing a stiff coronet on it?”

Nandhini shook her head. “Your quips never do cease, do they? Very well.” Her eyes gauged his own. “What was Ilaiya Piratti’s reaction upon learning of Ponniyin Selvan’s death in the sea? Did *she* drown in sorrow too?”

She had changed tack so abruptly that Vandhiyathevan blinked at the question, stunned. “Well, yes, wouldn’t she?” He ventured hesitantly. “Not all women are completely heartless, I should think.”

“What about the Kodumbalur girl? A little bird whispered that she tried to embrace death as well, by throwing herself into the stream—true? Who engineered her rescue, do you know?” Nandhini shot the questions.

Vandhiyathevan suddenly felt breathless, as memory of Vanathi’s assailants accosted him; he fell silent, lost in fear at what might have been her fate.

“So that’s how it is, is it?” Nandhini’s voice took on an edge of severity. “Not that I’m surprised; I knew you’d vouchsafe no answer. Very well—are you embarked on a mission to prevent Aditha Karikalar from visiting Kadambur?”

“I shall certainly try everything in my power to prevent such an eventuality.”

“And I claim that you shall achieve no success.”

“You’ll notice that I claim no success, either; the operative word being that I’d *try*, *Devi*. Should the prince set his heart on something, there’s precious little I or anyone else can do to deter him.”

“At any rate, you’re well aware of Aditha Karikalar’s quirks.”

“There’s someone else with even more intimate knowledge of his personality: you.”

“Well.” Nandhini drew a deep breath. “No argument I advance shall draw you to my side, would it? You’re firmly with my foes, then.”

“And who might they be, *Ammani*?”

“Who, you ask?” Her lips twisted with derision. “The Pazhaiyarai princess of course; who else?”

“Her enmity is a figment of your fertile imagination. *Devi*, if you’d permit me, kindly, to reveal a certain piece of vital, tremendous importance—”

“Oh enough, *Ayya*, enough! I know you well; too well to realize that any precious truth you spout now is far more likely to be a mountain of lies—keep them to yourself and revel in them!” Nandhini’s voice throbbed with barely concealed resentment as she clapped her hands; Ravidasan and his cohorts began to approach the next instant.

Realization dawned on Vandhiyathevan: he’d been offered an opportunity—but had failed to utilize it. His moment was now long gone; ah, this demon, this ghoul in the guise of a bewitching girl was about to command her men to execute him. Good God, he was to die—and what a death he’d been assigned by fate, to be sure; death at the hands of these mercenaries … *surely I deserve a glorious warrior’s farewell in the battlefield, grappling with enemies in a welter of blood and sweat? Why this? Why these men?*

Ravidasan and his motley gang penned him in with wild, throaty growls, wolves slavering at the scent of a choice feast. “Not all your powers would swerve this one, *Rani*, and we knew it,” the *mandhiravadhi*

smirked. “Pray, get to safety now. Leave him to our tender mercies; we’ll sacrifice him upon this very sacred site, and ensure that he troubles us no more.”

“Careful, *Mandhiravadhi*; that is not my wish. No one harms him—or I shall separate your head from your body with a stroke of this very sword and claim my revenge!”

The command, delivered in a wrathful roar, paralyzed her men.

“There is much that I require to be done yet, through this gentleman,” she managed to assuage their teeming doubts just a fraction. “I’m leaving this very moment; so must you all. This man may go where he chooses; his path ought not to be barred.”

“Permission to submit a query, *Devi*,” Ravidasan petitioned formally. “He may live—but is it wise to let him leave first, considering his stallion? Think, if you please, and come to a wise decision.”

“Fair enough; bind him stoutly to one of the columns of this *pallippadai*’s temple. Doubtless some time will be expended in trying to rid the rope; time that will allow you to cross the surrounding jungle without fear of hindrance,” promised Nandhini.

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Vandhiyathevan stood still, securely tied to a robust pillar in the crumbling memorial; at a little distance shifted his horse, tethered to a tree.

Nandhini had departed in her palanquin.

Two renegades had carried away the throne.

Ravidasan and his merry band of mercenaries were long gone, having spirited away the child.

The light of their torches faded by degrees as they sped away, finally winking out altogether.

Darkness, pitch black and malevolent, swiftly surrounded Vandhiyathevan.

All the scenes, the people of a while ago—had they all truly gathered; had it all really happened, he wondered, as his mind grappled with the outrageous sequence of events. Or was it all just an elaborate, insane dream?

Sadapada!—Giant bats flapped strong, broad wings in the night.

Mute owls showed their displeasure by a deep, rumbling *hoom—hoom!*

Jackals howled by turns and to Vandhiyathevan, paralyzed in the dark, they seemed to be hemming him in by the moment.

Dark shapes prowled amidst the vague, indistinct shape of trees; gloomy silhouettes that defied belief and logic.

Memories of the night at Kadambur rushed into his exhausted mind; Vandhiyathevan shivered despite himself, convinced that he was about to be devoured alive by a thousand jackals slavering at the mouth for his blood. He squirmed, twisted and turned, desperate to rid himself of the ropes that cut into his flesh—but they could not be divested that easily.

Even a faint illumination would have gone a long way towards helping him out of the ties—but there was none; not even the slightest chink of light.

Not the flash of lightning, or even the flicker of a light-worm, *minmini* insects.

And should the skies have cleared by now, allowing the glow of faint starlight, it was inconceivable that their pale rays might pierce the densely overlapping branches of thickly clustered trees.

Aha—what was that? Some sort of noise … well, that was hardly unusual, was it, considering the number of animals creeping through the foliage—wait, no; this was no animal’s padded feet—more like the bumbling steps of a human being, wasn’t it?

His horse uttered a nervous neigh, shying upon fore and hind legs, clearly gripped by unease. Surely the intruder wasn't a tiger or some other predator?

By now suffering a torment of desperation, Vandhiyathevan pulled and heaved, trying to rip apart the ropes; to no avail.

There—! *There* was someone; a black silhouette against the gloom. Human, or … but what else could it be?

The form stepped forward. Closer; closer …

Vandhiyathevan gathered every scrap of courage from the deepest recesses of his heart; drew a deep breath; concentrated every last ounce of strength in his legs—and delivered a phenomenal kick!

Veel! Shrieked the figure and leapt behind. It stumbled back a few steps, and there was a muffled clang: *Danaar*! Perhaps its head had connected unexpectedly with the memorial wall?

The figure stayed where it was for the next few moments; it seemed to be leaning against the wall. Despite the inky blackness, Vandhiyathevan derived the distinct impression that it was staring hard at him; his skin prickled.

Desperation threatened to overpower him as he twisted in earnest, trying to escape the binding ropes; ah, wretched, murderous *mandhiravadhi* who had conspired with his cohorts to knot him so cruelly —well, well, his time will come; Ravidasan's path must cross his own, soon—*and then I shall see to that wretch*!

The figure detached itself from the wall, and seemed to tiptoe into the *pallippadai*.

Strange sounds emanated from within the temple in a while: *dun—dun*! As though pebbles were being struck against one another.

A flickering light at the entrance.

There—there's the figure again, this time with a torch in its hands, walking out of the shrine.

It approaches him.

The silhouette resolves into a Kaalaamuka Veera Saivite. A terrifying form clad in the complete regalia of long, flowing beard; matted hair, and a dangling garland of skulls.

With slow, measured steps it crept ever closer to Vandhiyathevan, finally raising the torch high, staring intently into his face.

Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Eduppaar Kaippillai

When Nandhini elaborates on Karikalar's character to Ravidasan, she explains that he's nothing like Arulmozhi, using the phrase "Eduppaar Kaippillai" to describe the younger Chozha scion—a literal infant in arms, picked up by anyone. In other words, a mindless babe with no will or idea of his own.

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37
Disguise, Revealed

Vandhiyathevan felt a chill creep along his spine as he gaped at the fearsome Kaalaamuka Veera Saivite at that hour, within the memorial. Only for a moment, though; his characteristic insouciance asserted itself and along with it, natural courage: *I've seen him before, haven't I*? His mind raced. *Where, though?* And then …

…Why … yes, the two men who had walked up and stared hard at him as he snatched forty winks under a tree on the banks of the River Harichandra—and this was one of them, surely? But wait, was that all? Was this a face he had glimpsed just once; the subject of one random sighting? Had he never looked into those strangely piercing eyes before; eyes that rested on him with such a familiar, rueful expression?

By now the Kaalaamuka Saivite had decided that he had stared at Vandhiyathevan enough, and broke into loud cackles. "*Chee*, it's you is it?" He gurgled. "Why on earth did I go to all this trouble at midnight for you, of all men?" To Vandhiyathevan's senses, alert with suspicion, the timbre of his voice was just a shade unusual: was the man disguising it?

"Who else was the object of your search and rescue, then?" He demanded.

"The prince, of course," was the Kaalaamukan's prompt reply.

"Which one?"

"That's no concern of yours; why do you ask?"

"I'm a prince as well, if you must know."

"So much for a royal countenance!"

"What's wrong with it, I ask you? Would it be any more appealing if I draped myself in skull garlands, grew a beard and matted my hair into

long, unkempt locks?”

“You’ll know for sure if you tried the guise.”

“How long would it take to grow a luxurious beard and unruly knotted hair?”

“Ha, not long at all. Sometimes as quickly as a day; even a single *naazhigai*, depending on your necessity—”

“So I guessed.”

“Did you, now?”

“Untie me, won’t you, and I’ll throw in my lot with your cause without a moment’s delay.”

“Spare me the sacrifice. We’re plagued enough with spies of your ilk as it is, which explains the way our Mahasangam ended.”

“And—how *did* it end?”

“We waited endlessly for the prince to grace the occasion with his presence, hoping against hope that he’d pledge to appoint our exalted master as his Raja Guru once he ascended the Chozha throne … all to no avail, for he never put in an appearance.”

“Loosen my bonds, and I can solve *that* mystery at any rate. Wouldn’t you like to know why your precious prince never arrived?”

“Which one?”

“Who else but Kandaradhithar’s son Madhuranthakar?”

“Ha; my suspicions were right!”

“What about?”

“You, of course; a spy, aren’t you?”

“And how did you arrive at this remarkable conclusion?”

“I caught sight of a group of people skulking, during my search for the prince. I knew their identity, of course; they must’ve bound you well in suspicion of your prowling and spying—but one question does gnaw my head: why did they spare you?”

“Untie me now, and I shall relieve you of the mighty gnawing.”

“Unnecessary; I’m not about to release you either. Now, submit to my instructions, and—”

“Submit to *what*?”

“That you will never, henceforth, poke your long nose into matters not of your concern—and complete hundred and eight *thoppukkaranams*, besides!”

“Must I, indeed?” Vandhiyathevan muttered. His nimble fingers had not been idle during this somewhat involved conversation, working through the knots slowly but surely. By the time the Kaalaamukan mentioned the unique punishment of holding the tips of one’s ears and beginning a series of swift squats, the ropes cutting into his flesh had all but fallen apart.

Vandhiyathevan waited no more—and pounced on the Kaalaamukan, who sprawled gracelessly on the ground. His torch tumbled as well but did not burn out altogether, still flickering valiantly.

Having wrestled the Kaalaamukan into a position of disadvantage, Vandhiyathevan plunked himself squarely on his chest and tugged hard at the man’s beard—which promptly came away in his hand. The Saivite shrugged off the warrior in one swift, practiced movement and stood up the next instant.

Vandhiyathevan picked up the spluttering torch, about to give up its ghost altogether and raised it above his head—to see the familiar sight of Azhwarkkadiyaan’s rotund, humorous countenance, devoid of the Kaalaamuka regalia, beard and matted hair.

The two stared at each other for a moment—and collapsed at their respective awe-stricken faces, chuckling for the next few moments with

equal parts relief and mirth.

“So much for your saintly advice to stop poking my nose into affairs not my concern, Vaishnavite,” Vandhiyathevan began, with a final, amused hiccup. “What do you think *you’ve* been doing, pray?”

“Fair point—but unlike you, I wasn’t exactly bound to a pillar, *Appane*,” Azhwarkkadiyaan quipped. “If I hadn’t arrived in the nick of time—”

“Think you delivered me, do you?”

“Even if you’d wriggled out of the ropes all by your capable self, you still couldn’t have walked out of this jungle without my aid; you’d be jackals’ meal within moments.”

“Forget the four-legged ones; if you’d only seen the two-legged jackals gathered here a while ago …” Vandhiyathevan shuddered. “A wonder that I even escaped *their* clutches!”

“I’m not exactly unfamiliar with them, you know. Were only the *mandiravadhis* present? Or any others?”

“A little fish too—unusual, that one: it wanted to swallow tigers.”

“Did it? *Aha*, go on, go on, my man—who was there; what happened—tell me all, quickly!”

“First things first: why this disguise? Where were you this evening? What happened there? Reveal all, Vaishnavite, and all shall be revealed to you in turn.”

“There’s nothing much to tell, if you must know: information reached me of a Kaalaamuka Mahasangam on the banks of the Kollidam earlier tonight—hence this disguise, so I could observe the proceedings without suspicion. I’d planned on joining you later, at the Kollidam ferry. The Mahasangam gathered as per plan; present was their head, their Guru; Pazhuvettarayar duly arrived—but the one most expected, never did.”

“Prince Madhuranthakar, I presume?”

“Indeed—but how did *you* know?”

“What a wonderful prospect for the throne, to be sure—if Madhuranthakar ever did manage to heave himself onto it in one piece, that is.”

“Interesting; why do you say that?”

“When a man cannot even handle a restive horse, Vaishnavite, what price unruly warrior-lords like Pazhuvettarayar; revolting, rebelling Kaalaamuka Saivites and stormy petrels of Vaishnavites?”

It took a few moments for Azhwarkkadiyaan to subside from the guffaws that shook him. “I understand you saw Madhuranthakar on your way; well, what of his fate?”

Vandhiyathevan described his attempts to follow the bumbling prince; Madhuranthakar’s horse shying in fright at sight of a man holding aloft a torch; the desperate search in the driving rain—and his final glimpse of the horse sans rider on the threshing field. “*Ayyo*, the poor, poor man,” he sympathized as he wound up his narrative. “I wonder where that wild horse flung him? He may be lying in some ditch helpless, in grave danger—which explains his absence at your Mahasangam.” He paused. “We ought to look for him, oughtn’t we?”

“Here’s a pretty tale! What do *you* care—not to mention that we lack the luxury of hunting lost princes in pitch blackness. No, there’s our own assignment to complete; come, now,” Azhwarkkadiyaan was insistent. “We ought to be at the Kollidam ferry by daybreak.”

“What if he’s lying in some canal or field, dangerously injured or even, God forbid, dead?” Vandhiyathevan persisted. “Would you still insist on not caring about his fate?”

“He couldn’t be in such dire straits; Aniruddhar would’ve made sure against such eventualities.”

“The Chief Minister? What would *he* know of all this?”

“Another pretty tale, my man—what sort of a question is this? What could possibly happen anywhere in this *rajyam* without Anbil

Aniruddhar's knowledge?"

"*Oho*—was he also aware of the midnight conspiracy in Kadambur?"

"Dredge this from your memory, if you will: the Veera Narayanapuram festivities; the two of us under a tree, watching the Pazhuvoor Rani's palanquin pass—"

"And your uncontrollable agitation as its silk screen rustled. You even begged me to deliver an olai to the young queen, if memory doesn't betray me."

"It doesn't, much to my embarrassment. My ears ring even now with your disgusted *Chee! What sort of favour do you ask?* comment—so convinced were you that I intended her a romantic message. What I'd really wanted was to pass on a warning to Madhuranthakar: *Do not be tricked by the wiles of conspirators* … as per the Mudhanmandhiri's instructions."

"Did you know that the prince was the palanquin's occupant?"

"I suspected so in the beginning; I knew for certain when the screen was withdrawn. But you—ah, you're certainly a master of secrets; you refused to tell me you knew of the switch, despite my moving heaven and earth to find out."

"I could say the same of you—you wouldn't divulge your destination this evening, despite *my* moving heaven and earth too."

"You'd have wanted to interfere if I had; witness the mess you've landed in now! Henceforth at least—"

"The Mudhanmandhiri—does he know of the Kaalaamukar gathering and Madhuranthakar's supposed attendance?"

"Why else do you think he bid me there? And yet, he'd undoubtedly made arrangements to keep Madhuranthakar from participating … you mentioned someone holding aloft a torch, didn't you? Surely one of Aniruddhar's men, instructed to make sure the horse shied and bounded away in terror. Someone would've rescued the fallen prince, I'm sure—he should be on his way to Thanjai in a comfortably sprung chariot or

luxurious palanquin, I should think. Now come; we ought to be on our way as well."

"I couldn't possibly, Vaishnavite."

"Well, of all the—! What of your sacred mission? News has reached me that Aditha Karikalar is on his way to Kadambur even as we speak; we shall have to fly like the very wind to reach—"

"You may as well deliver the olai meant for him. After all, he's unlikely to either parade around in a woman's guise or travel at night, fearful of his safety—"

"And you? What of your intentions?"

"If you must know the truth—Madhuranthakar was not the object of my pursuit this evening … I practically butted into him by accident in the midst of another quest."

"If I may indulge in a spot of prediction: you were following a lady, weren't you?"

"You impudent wretch, you—I'm going to break your head one of these days, I swear, before I do anything else."

"Impossible, boy; this hardened skull of mine has already been mortgaged to a Kaalaamukan … be that as it may; the lady you were shadowing when you left Kudanthai—who was she?"

"The Kodumbalur princess was visiting the astrologer's home; she left quite alone. I wasn't even following the lunatic at that point—our paths simply converged for a space; her palanquin travelled along my route for a short distance. Abruptly, a few men assaulted her party, tied her *thaathi*, her companion to a tree and made away with Vanathi. Which explains my hesitation in coming with you—I couldn't possibly, until I know her fate for certain."

"What does it matter? Why do *you* care?"

"*Oy*, how could you even ask? The daughter of Siriya Velaar, martyred in Eezham, isn't she? The most beloved confidante of

Pazhaiyarai's Ilaiya Piratti? And then, well—there was talk too, at one point, of a wedding between her and Ponniyin Selvar—"

"A moot point, *Appane*, since the prince has drowned at sea. His non-existent wedding doesn't even merit a fleeting thought, does it?"

"So sure, are you? Of his death? It could just be anyone's guess, yet."

"He's still alive, you believe?"

"If it's your intelligent intention to draw out secrets, you cunning Vaishnavite, you'd do well to give up that attempt here and now."

"Well do I know your vastly reticent heart, locked and bolted like the proverbial vault—but I *would* like to assure you on one count: there's no need to worry about Vanathi Devi. She's the apple of Ilaiya Piratti's eye, as I'm sure you know."

"Precisely my concern; it's entirely possible that the princess is unaware of the danger to her companion, isn't it?"

"Only a matter of time; she'd get to know tomorrow, if not today."

"And what would be the point of *that*, I ask you? Should those devious Kaalaamukars sacrifice that young maiden before daybreak—"

"Wait—*what* did you say? Were *they* her abductors?"

"So it seemed, to me. Vanathi's maid corroborated my impression too."

"If that indeed be the case, you're absolved of all anxiety, for the Kodumbalur clan is allied with the Kaalaamukar sect; should they recognize Vanathi, they're likely to suffocate her with royal treatment."

"Would they, now? I was unaware of that circumstance."

"Why else do you think the Kaalaamukars are dead against Madhuranthakar?"

“What sort of earth-shattering havoc can a few hermits prowling with skulls around their necks possibly wreak?”

“An adequate display of ignorance, *Thambi*, but that will do: you ought to know that some of this *samrajyam*’s greatest, privileged families are of the Kaalaamukar faith; the Chozha *sainyam* boasts a great many of their members, which explains Pazhuvettarayar striving tooth and nail to convene an assembly and thereby, guarantee their allegiance to Madhuranthakar. A massive undertaking that was utterly destroyed by the antics of an unruly horse, I should say. Now—are you coming with me, or am I supposed to make my way alone?”

Vandhiyathevan groaned and gripped his horse’s reins with a great show of loathing. The two picked their way laboriously through narrow paths overgrown with foliage, negotiating the pitch-black forest minute by tedious minute, until, finally, they were out into blessedly open land.

“Up there,” Azhwarkkadiyaan pointed.

Vandhiyathevan glanced up to see the comet in its all-encompassing glory; long tail fanning out across almost half the night sky.

Cold Vaadai winds knifed through the landscape; his body, already chilled with the night’s events, shivered.

Somewhere in the distance, a lonely village mongrel howled pitifully while the world slumbered through its distress.

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38

What of Vanathi?

The sun had sunk beneath the horizon; darkness swirled in, sweeping out the last, tentative chinks of light with inky tendrils as Vanathi travelled within her palanquin in solitary state, along the Kudanthai-Thiruvaarur highway.

Within her, confusion and concern warred for supremacy: her heart skipped several beats when a vivid picture of Ponniyin Selvan lying fevered and helpless in Choodamani Viharam flashed across her mind; she yearned to stay by his side and serve him—but *could* she? Would austere Buddhist monks even allow a female to set foot within their monastery? Should they be so magnanimous, could she see the prince and even then—would she, after surmounting all these considerable obstacles, be permitted to nurse him? She could barely draw breath at the sheer enormity of the task before her; a terror that evolved into full-blown panic at having dared to travel to Naagaippattinam all alone.

With every scrap of courage she possessed, Vanathi tried to banish the despair that threatened to overwhelm her: which mammoth task in the world had ever been easily achieved? Hadn't she heard endless tales of this hero or that crossing the seven seas and climbing hill and plumbing dales to achieve his ambition? Why, that boat-girl—what a determined spirit she must be to sail all alone, in mid-sea! What a hardened heart; what will of iron could have given her the strength to paddle through storm and wind; gale, rain and massive waves the size of mountains, and save the prince! And here was Vanathi, quaking at the very thought of a mundane journey by road …

Surely it wouldn't matter if she couldn't enter the *viharam* right away? She could scrounge information about the prince in the vicinity; she'd try to suppress the longing to see him—it would be enough if she could just meet that boat-girl … ah, yes, an acquaintance with her might pave the path to one with the prince; a means to prove to her hero that

her love rested not upon future glory, that it was for love's own sake and nothing else … after which there was no further need to be alive; she might renounce life altogether, or at least worldly life by becoming a *bikshuni*—how long did it take to reach Naagai, anyway? Precisely when would she get to her destination tomorrow?

Vanathi pushed the palanquin's screen just a smidgeon with the intention of asking her bearers—when something caught her eye: a glimpse of a few men amidst the tall, statuesque trees lining the road. She stared harder, and discovered that they were Veera Saivite Kaalaamukars—a discovery that fazed her not at all; her residence at the Kodumbalur palace had inured her to these fearsome men who had been frequent visitors, often seeking audience with her *periya thanthai* and receiving the required monetary assistance. Why, their leader, the Chief Guru had himself honoured them with a personal visit, necessitating a great many rituals and elaborate ceremonies. Her uncle Boodhi Vikrama Kesari had granted the Kaalaamukars countless *nivanthams* for sustenance in plenty of temples … all of which meant that members of that alarming sect would do her no harm. If anything, they'd be more likely to lend her assistance, for Vanathi was well aware of the Mahasangam's assembly that day; she'd even seen groups of Kaalaamukars on the road from Pazhaiyarai to Kudanthai.

And yet, something niggled at the back of her imaginative mind: why were they skulking behind trees? Could they—could they have mistaken her for someone else perhaps, and intend harm?

Thud, thud, thud—the men began to sprint forward as the thoughts raced through her mind—and surrounded the palanquin in moments.

Vanathi retained her composure even then, fully intending to impress upon them her identity—but something made her freeze the next instant: the sight of her companion being caught and tied to a tree by two men.

She could not help it; a panic-stricken shriek escaped her lips—only to be answered with a terrifying three-pronged *thirisoolam* brandished before her face by a Kaalaamukan.

“Shut up, and we will not lay a finger on you,” he growled. “Shout—and you will find this in your heart.”

Suddenly, Vanathi found a tiny wellspring of courage from somewhere deep within. “Do you even know who I am?” She demanded with a creditable assumption of majesty. “Kodumbalur Velaar’s daughter, I tell you; touch me, and you’ll find yourself ruined!” Her voice shook, however, betraying the bravado.

“Quiet, Girl; of course we know everything—why else do you think we were waiting for you? Now, seal those lips or—” And he hefted the weapon again.

Suleer! — *Suleer*! A whip whistled through the air, smacking into solid flesh; the sound of an agonized “*Ayyo*! — *Ayyo*!” pierced Vanathi’s ears as she realized that her own bearers were being thrashed by some of the Kaalaamukars. Anger suffused her; she was about to climb down to demand a furious explanation—but circumstances decided otherwise: the bearers picked up the palanquin abruptly and proceeded at a run; the Kaalaamukars accompanied them at the same pace, surrounding the *pallakku*.

Terrifying yells erupted from them as they kept the frantic pace and it flashed across Vanathi’s mind that her own screams for help would be drowned out by their stentorian bellows. There was no question of jumping out of the palanquin—especially as she’d have to land in their midst, anyway. And there was the streak of curiosity that intruded now and then: where on earth were they taking her, and why? Surely she’d discover the purpose of this abduction soon enough.

Half a *naazhigai* of this determined run and they arrived at an old, crumbling Durgai shrine amidst the trees. Twilight having vanished, night had settled with a vengeance; one of the men entered the temple and returned with a burning torch, raising it to Vanathi’s face.

“You had better tell us what we wish to know, Girl,” one of the Kaalaamukars growled out in a low, threatening voice. “And we shall release you unharmed—or even escort you to your destination, wherever that might be.”

Vanathi straightened, unnerved by a suspicion that had not troubled her thus far. “What could I possibly know? What do you wish to ask me?” She demanded.

“This sudden journey of yours—was it not with the intention of meeting someone in secret? Who is it? Who were you planning to meet?”

Her suspicions were proven right, then … and something shifted, within Vanathi. Those moments of sheer, mind-numbing panic transformed a shivering, quaking doe terrified of everything—into a magnificent, majestic lioness afraid of nothing. “How do my travel plans concern you?” She snapped. “What does it matter whom I meet—and who’re you to demand these details? I shan’t tell you anything!”

“You need not,” the Kaalaamukan cackled. “For, we know all. Such haste in this secretive, solitary expedition, and all for the sake of Prince Arulmozhi Varman, is it not? Now, all you have to do is reveal his refuge, and you will be released without a scratch.”

“You may do what you wish with me, but not a thing will I reveal,” Vanathi’s answer was dismissive, yet firm.

“So you say—but you will change your tune when you realize exactly what we have planned for you.”

“Do enlighten me, won’t you?”

“See this torch, here? One of your slender, beautiful hands, delicate as a flower shall be scorched in its flames, followed by the other. Your luxurious tresses, flowing like black silk shall have their assignation with fire, next—”

“By all means,” Vanathi thrust her chin in a fine show of defiance. “Here’s my hand; where’s your torch? Bring it over!”

For all her sheltered upbringing in an endless stream of royal palaces, the Kodumbalur princess was not exactly unaware of the state of the *samrajyam* at the moment; the conspiracies plaguing its serenity and the devious plotters threatening to annihilate it. *These wicked men*

must be amongst those terrifying, disloyal schemers, her mind raced, trying to find coherency in all that had happened. *They're trying to worm out the prince's whereabouts Vanathi*, whispered a voice in her heart. *Why? Why else but to cause him grievous harm? And if I should undergo pain and torture for his sake—to keep his precious person safe—ah, what more could I crave? Would such suffering not be my greatest blessing?* The sentiments bolstered her fluttering heart, strengthening the Kodumbalur princess's flagging resolve.

"Well, Woman? Think well, I tell you; if you insist on being obstinate, you will regret it," warned the Kaalaamukan. "Your eyes will be burnt; you will be a sightless, hideous creature, condemned to a pathetic existence all your life!"

"Burn every inch of my flesh; cut my body into pieces—but not a word will you get out of me." Iron determination throbbed in Vanathi's voice.

"Fair enough; time to get on with our task," the Kaalaamukan shook his head. "You, there—bring forth that torch!"

Something attracted Vanathi's attention at that moment—something unusual; something that offered her a burst of unlooked for hope—a long procession of elephants; horses; infantry men and palanquins, wending their way in her direction. *God be thanked*, prayed her fervent heart. *Help is here; my patron deity hasn't abandoned me!* "Careful—over there," she pointed.

The Kaalaamukan's response was a chilling cackle. "Know who they are?"

"The Mudhanmandhiri, I should think," was Vanathi's assured answer. "My screams shall certainly reach their ears—I warn you: leave me and run, or else—"

"I applaud your keen faculties, Woman; they certainly serve you well. You were right; our new arrival is indeed Chief Minister Anbil Aniruddhar," admitted the Kaalaamukan. The gleam in his eyes was unsettling. "And on whose command do you think you were captured?"

Vanathi stared at him, paralyzed, even as horror poured in full-fledged, once more. A panic-stricken shriek tore itself from her throat unbidden—and she tried to close her mouth with her palm, in a vain bid at self-control.

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39
Gajendra's Salvation

Vanathi had remained within the safety of the palanquin all this while; now the bearers lowered it to the ground, and she stepped out gingerly. Her eyes followed the approaching cavalcade; likewise, sight pinned unwaveringly in the same direction, stood the silent Kaalaamukars. The raucous croaks of a thousand frogs in the surrounding watery fields battled the unsettling rustle of tree branches in the cold Vaadai winds—the only sounds to be heard.

Not for a moment did Vanathi consider making a run for it; naïve she might be, but even she knew that an attempt at escape would be impossible. One might flee fearsome Kaalaamukars, but evading the tenacious clutches of Anbil Aniruddhar—ah, that was simply not to be thought of: the man's intellect was intimidating; his genius for strategy phenomenal and his ability to see through the wiliest tricks, legendary. Then, there was his much-vaunted influence with the Chakravarthy; the ladies of Pazhaiyarai's hoary palaces might gossip with vim about every official and lord of the Chozha realm save one—the renowned chief minister. Tales abounded of the ears that reported to him from every corner of the kingdom; queens and princesses quaked to speak of him in the most private *anthappuram* chambers of the highest-ranking royal, for even those highly-guarded words would reach him, somehow. To mention the Mudhanmandhiri was sacrilege; the Chozha Emperor, a man of equilibrium in most matters would not stand a word against someone he trusted with his life and something infinitely precious: his heart.

The Kodumbalur princess was not exactly unaware of Aniruddhar's authority—nor of Kundhavai Devi's own reverence for the most intelligent man of the *samrajyam*. Under the circumstances, it had seemed natural to expect his protection and assistance … until the Kaalaamukars revealed otherwise, that is. Her courage, fragile under the best of circumstances, crumbled: why must such a powerful personage wish to capture a defenseless orphan? Or—were the Kaalaamukars lying

through their teeth? Could the approaching entourage possibly belong to the Pazhuvettarayars? Madhuranthakar and his escort detail, perhaps?

Well, one thing was certain: whoever it was wouldn't get a word from her about the prince. Not a single detail would they wrest no matter what the cost; *even my own life*, Vanathi swore to herself—and regained, the next instant, some measure of the spirit that had drained away just moments ago.

*Let them come, whoever it is; just **let** them*, she clenched her slender fists. *They shall know me for who I am: the scion of Kodumbalur Velirs—a byword for indomitable courage; the dearest, most beloved companion of Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai!*

One palanquin detached itself from the cavalcade while the elephants, horses and the rest of the entourage stayed apart. The *pallakku*, meanwhile, came to a stop by Vanathi; the curtains moved to reveal Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar who made a calm, collected descent. At a sign from him, the bearers and Kaalaamukars stepped neatly aside, leaving the great man to turn his attention fully upon the Kodumbalur princess.

Aniruddhar's steely gaze travelled steadily up and down Vanathi's form in the flickering light. "By the heavens—what is this sight that meets my eyes? Have I suddenly entered a surreal dreamscape—or is it truly the princess of Kodumbalur in front of me, the beloved, precious daughter of Paranthakan Siriya Velaar, blessed martyr of the Eezham war?"

"These astonishing exclamations ought surely to come from me, *Ayya*: is it I who have entered a dreamscape, perhaps? Or do I truly perceive the illustrious Anbil Aniruddha Brahmaraayar, revered and respected by every Chozha citizen?" was Vanathi's spirited riposte. "Surely my eyes don't deceive me by presenting the form of the Mudhanmandhiri most beloved of the Chakravarthy himself?"

"Your awareness of my identity warms the cockles of my heart, *Thaaye*, for this facilitates my task, which I had counted complicated thus far—not to mention the fact that you shall be subjected to very little trouble."

“*Aha*—such considerations need never concern you; not for a moment shall I regard any difficulty I might undergo as a result of your machinations, Oh Jewel among Ministers! All travails or tribulations I meet at your hands shall be nothing but a delight.”

“Your attitude settles my qualms more than ever, my dear. Indeed, subjecting you to any sort of travail—more than what is strictly necessary, that is—is very far from my intentions, I do assure you. A trifling question or two, *Amma*; your answers, and soon enough—”

“I have a question or two, *Ayya*, before I submit to your interrogation —”

“But do ask, by all means! You need feel not the slightest hesitation, for I am as a father to you; you stand to me in the position of a daughter. I had the immense good fortune of meeting your *periya thanthai*, Senathipathi Boodhi Vikrama Kesari in Maathottam a few days ago, at which time he begged me to have a care for you as my own, and I duly gave him every assurance that I would …”

“I thank you for your consideration with all my heart, revered Father. The Chakravarthy assured this orphan that he would be one, when I lost my father—and now here you are, offering your protection and reassurances on the same head. Ah, was any one more fortunate than I?”

“To come to the point, *Amma*, if you would not mind—for the skies darken swiftly, and the gathering clouds indicate rain …”

“I have not the slightest intention of inconveniencing you: to come to the point, as you eloquently said: was it indeed you, dear Father, who commanded these Kaalaamukars to obstruct your daughter’s blameless journey; to employ force in capturing her, and dragging her to this God-forsaken place? Was it you these scoundrels obeyed when they threatened to burn this defenseless maid’s hand in the fire of yonder torches? I cannot bring myself to believe the terrible accusations cast by these loathsome men—”

“And yet, my child, they were right; mine indeed was the command and mine the culpability, if crime there be—”

“Oh legendary Chozha Minister, revered in all three worlds! I am astonished—nay, perplexed at these stunning words: *if crime there be,* you say? If, Father? *If*, from a scholar distinguished in all the scriptures ever written; an exponent of every treatise on justice and Dharma *Saasthram*; the propagator of law and order in this vast *samrajyam*; the one man vested with power and authority to question the Chakravarthy, should he take a step against the interests of justice … pray, who else should know better? Is it not a crime, I ask you, to capture an innocent young woman going her way—to drag her to a lonely, secluded spot and then threaten to torture her? And who else but you may answer the injustice or otherwise of such action, if I may ask? I’ve heard it said that travel is a joy; an undertaking of the greatest safety in Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy’s rule—a rule that metes out especially torturous punishments for men who dare to harass hapless females … but here I find you only vaguely musing over whether such actions qualify as a crime! Surely this is a bewildering, perplexing turn of events?”

Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar, having tried to intervene once or twice during this superbly vitriolic tirade, found himself floundering in a morass of stunned astonishment. Not for nothing was he the most erudite man in the kingdom, however, for he regained his composure in a moment. “Pray take a breath, my girl, before you exhaust your considerable vocabulary or run out of air,” his tone assumed a measure of severity. “There was a reason for that qualifying phrase about crime—and that depends largely on your answers to my question. News reached me of a young woman in possession of a most important state secret, travelling along the road to Naagaippattinam; I issued commands to my men to stop her at once—which they carried out in a way they imagined was in accordance with my instructions. There *may* have been a mistake, I am willing to admit; rather than snagging a hardened spy neck-deep in a criminal conspiracy they might have laid hands on you, returning from an evening of predictions with the Kudanthai astrologer. Well, my daughter? *Was* Pazhaiyarai indeed your intended destination? Did your bearers stray onto the Naagai road by mistake? Surely you did not embark on a journey to that town with the express intent of meeting a man steeped in a terrifying conspiracy against this very kingdom? Should you offer incontrovertible proof that you harboured no such sentiments, these men would be at fault; so would I. Well, my girl? In case all these arguments made no sense, allow me to clarify the matter: you did not embark on a

journey to Naagai, by any chance, bent upon a clandestine meeting with Prince Arulmozhi Varman?”

The Kodumbalur princess listened to this devious speech with a rising horror that soon transformed into sheer, blazing fury—a fury that made her wonder if burning at the stake would be too good a fate for this despicable minister. Fortunately, she retained enough self-control to realize that a show of anger would serve no purpose under the circumstances.

That young maiden, naïve in the ways of the world until that moment, discovered within herself a wellspring of masterful strategy; a sudden, exceptional talent for forethought—that allowed insight into her next course of action. And so, “But—what’s this you say, *Ayya*? Prince Arulmozhi Varmar engaged in a terrible conspiracy?” She changed tack admirably, feigning well-simulated surprise. “A crime I should say, to speak so about the Chakravarthy’s beloved son; surely a conspiracy against the very Chozha dynasty?” Vanathi opened her eyes wide. “Such a fact ought to be brought to the attention of Kundhavai Piratti at once!”

“With my goodwill, *Thaaye*; there is absolutely no need for you to tarry here a moment, once my question has been answered; why, I shall provide you with my own personal escort to the princess—”

“And if I should refuse—?”

“I am afraid you are simply denied that option, my dear. There is no way to escape the attentions of this old man without an answer,” smiled the minister.

“*Ayya*—most powerful of men in this *samrajyam*; illustrious Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddha Brahmaraayar! I regret to inform you that there’s nothing to be learnt about the prince from this poor, defenseless maid; not a word shall you wring from me—no, not even if these terrifying envoys of death, these *yamakingarars* carry out their threat of a moment ago to burn my hands.”

“*Komagalae*! Noble scion of the valorous Velirs; guiding light of the Kodumbalur dynasty; my gracious lady … I applaud your indomitable spirit; truly, I do. And yet, allow me to point out an infinitesimal detail you

might have missed as a result of your remarkable peroration: it is not entirely true, my dear, that you know nothing of the prince—already, you have divulged quite a few facts. Surely, it is no hardship, no great loss to admit just one more? Not to mention easing my own task …"

Vanathi stared at him, more startled than she cared to admit; had she inadvertently revealed what she shouldn't have? Had her unruly tongue run away with her, despite every attempt at secrecy? The very idea made her tremble; an icy hand twisted her heart in its merciless grip. She forced her stuttering breath to even out, casting her mind back on all that had happened. *No, I haven't betrayed anything—not a single detail*, she decided, and regained some of her composure. "To think of your lips, purified by the constant chanting of the divine Vedhas, uttering monstrous falsehoods, *Ayya*," she rallied creditably. "The Chief Minister of the *samrajyam*, Mudhanmandhiri to Sundara Chozhar himself, concocting such a vicious parade of lies! I said not a word about the prince; yet you declare that I did—"

"But do exercise the brain I know you possess, *Thaaye*; just a little, I pray: it is a mistake, a grievous error indeed to assume that you revealed nothing, just because you chose not to discuss the subject. Hark! I shall now disclose all that you admitted, my dear, without the intention to do so: the whole world has descended into chaos at the news of Prince Arulmozhi Varmar's drowning; the country is lost in a veritable sea of grief and yet you, despite being aware of this disastrous report, declared that you would not reveal a word about the prince. Now, I invite you to analyze that statement: clearly, you know that he is still alive. You did not, furthermore, deny my accusation about your journey to Naagaippattinam to meet him; you did not, I remember well, retort with the question: *How could I possibly meet a prince reported to be dead?* Neither did you contradict my claim of your destination; you did not refute it with the name of another town or city. The obvious, undeniable conclusion, therefore, is that you are on your way to Naagaippattinam to meet the prince; this much you have volunteered. Now, I require but two more trifling details: reveal, if you please, his precise location in that town—and *how* you came to know of this information. Disclose these and you need stay not a moment more, I assure you, in conversation with this detestable *kizhavan*. You are free to go where you choose."

These moments were the lowest of the low for poor Vanathi. Her heart lurched with a sort of horrified misery; too late, the Kodumbalur princess realized that her naïveté had been her undoing; her so-called wits had been no match for the intellectual prowess of Aniruddhar. *My stupidity has dragged me into indiscretion*, she realized, stricken. *In my folly, I've betrayed confidential information about the prince—good God! How do I seek forgiveness? Is there even a chance of redemption for such an outrageous crime? No—no, there's no way out; no deliverance … except to renounce my own life*.

Aloud, "You mentioned just now that you were my *periya thanthai*'s intimate friend, *Ayya*," she said, slowly. "You were even gracious enough to acknowledge me as your own daughter—and I now seek to make a claim on that generosity: I don't wish to go to Naagai; neither will I return to Pazhaiyarai—"

"Kodumbalur, then, I suppose; a most reasonable desire. I shall arrange for you to travel home just as you wish."

"No, *Ayya*; not home but a destination farther, much farther afield; I wish to travel from this world to the next," Vanathi announced. "You may command your men to sacrifice me on that altar over there and facilitate my journey, if you please."

"I gave my word that your request be fulfilled, whatever it may be, my dear—and if a passage to the other world is your heart's desire, then so be it … but not before my questions are answered."

"I must beg you not to importune me any further, *Ayya*, for I shall volunteer no answers. If what you said awhile ago is indeed true—that I stand to you in the position of your daughter—"

"I entertain not the slightest doubt on that score, Child. You are as my own blood to me, for you can have no idea of your family's bond with this Chozha servant: the friendship between your *periya thanthai* and myself dates more than forty years. And yet, my dear, there can be no question of loyalty or love when it comes to affairs of state; such emotions weaken the call of duty. Fathers and daughters can answer no call to emotion in governance—witness the Chakravarthy's actions if you

will: did he not issue orders to arrest his own son for having conspired against the kingdom?"

"Shame, *Ayya*, to speak so about Ponniyin Selvar! And what's this monstrous conspiracy he's supposed to be engaged in; this terrible sin?"

"Ah, you have no idea, do you? My sorrowful duty, then to apprise you of his preposterous transgression," the Mudhanmandhiri shook his head with well-feigned distress. "Ponniyin Selvar left for Ilankai with the intention of making war, or so he declared. Our forces launched attacks on Eezham's armies and scored an impressive victory—but this is where the prince lost both head and wits: he attempted to turn the situation to his own advantage, and seize the throne of Ilankai. Surely even you, my dear, must admit that this is treason of the highest order? What else could be natural than the Chakravarthy's command to arrest his beloved son on charges of treachery? The prince, however, decided to contravene royal orders by jumping into the sea on purpose, allowing tales of his drowning to take wing; he came ashore and is now clearly concealed in some secret location. And you—clearly you were unaware of all this, which is probably why you refused to volunteer his whereabouts. I must warn you, Child, of the terrible treason you are committing by merely withholding such valuable official information—you would do well to divulge all you know."

His suave words, uttered in a silken voice, were the sparks needed to set Vanathi's smouldering heart on fire: *too much*—the Mudhanmandhiri's despicable aspersions upon the prince's character and actions were too much—she could not bear these horrible, loathsome accusations—she would *not*.

"Have a care to your words, *Ayya*," her voice throbbed with the fury of a lioness roused to magnificent wrath; that subdued young woman's mien transformed into the very image of proud valour. "No one shall brook these terrible charges against the prince; no one! You blame him most unjustly, for he was the reason the Chozha forces, exhausted with warfare, roused to enthusiasm; his presence spurred them to a splendid victory; to Ponniyin Selvar goes the credit of a hard-won campaign—and the whole world is aware of this fact. As for the citizens of Ilankai, they took him to their hearts, won over by his courage, his selflessness and other wonderful traits; what surprise, pray, that they should wish him for

their ruler in place of a cowardly king who showed his back to the enemy on the battlefield? Why shouldn't the Buddhist monks have offered the Ilankai throne to the prince—an honour he refused, mind you. And this is the man you choose to abuse; this is the hero you taint with blame, for the prince rushed to Thanjai the moment he received his father's command; a journey undertaken of his own volition and if he jumped into the sea, that was on account of his kind heart as well—an instinct to save his dear friend. There was no intent, not even the faintest suspicion of a conspiracy against the Chakravarthy in his heart, believe me—ah, that my ears were unfortunate enough to listen to such ghastly accusations—"

"Good heavens, my girl," Aniruddhar's low rumble of amusement cut through her outburst. "Such an impressive argument: passionate, impulsive and truly moving—have a care yourself, my dear, for imagine anyone's reaction if they heard you." His eyes gleamed in the darkness. "You and Arulmozhi Varmar might be taken for lovers, I should think."

If these words were meant to destroy Vanathi's composure, they missed the mark. "Half of what you said is indeed the stark naked truth, *Ayya*," the Kodumbalur princess admitted without missing a beat. "I've given my heart to him, and I see no reason to keep it from you—but I'm not naïve enough to believe that his might have a place for this hapless orphan: the pretty, fragile *anril* bird might lose itself to the brilliant *chandran*, dazzling in the night sky—but there's no reason to believe that the Moon God is even aware of an *anril*'s existence—"

"But charming, my dear—truly delightful," Aniruddhar nodded his appreciation. "That I should never have known my friend's daughter for a true *kavitha rasikai*, with the soul of a bard! But then, you are Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi's devoted companion, after all."

"Cease these speeches, for I've no desire to listen to empty praise. Either let me go my way, *Ayya*, or command your men this very moment."

"Now patience, my child; stay, just a moment. Having learnt so much of Ponniyin Selvar from your own lips, it has become more evident than ever that you cannot but know his present location. All you must do is reveal it, and I shall send you to your *periya thanthai* at once. He has

returned from Ilankai after all, and must have reached Madurai at the very latest—”

“I wouldn’t charge my uncle with the allegation of your friendship, *Ayya*; he could never claim a bond with a man as despicable as you. No; of kin I have none. All that I’ve related about the prince is common knowledge; details known to everyone. You can learn nothing more from me; I must beg you not to delay whatever you mean to do.”

“I must not, indeed; wise words, for it looks like rain—”

“Your very presence, *Ayya*, will bring not just rain upon our heads, but thunder, lightning—why, the fearsome deluge that drowned the earth!” was Vanathi’s acid retort.

And in truth, a jagged shard of lightning tore the sky from one end to the other, as though to prove her prediction. The moment the radiant flash vanished and pitch blackness surrounded once more, a long, ominous roar of thunder crashed through the heavens, making the very cosmos judder.

“For the last time, Woman: will you, or will you not tell me where Prince Arulmozhi Varman is hidden?”

“I will not.”

“My suspicions were not unfounded, then: you were on your way to meet the prince at a secret location with a confidential message. True, or not?”

“I find this interrogation pointless, *Ayya*; I’ve no intention of answering any of your questions.”

“You leave me with no choice, my lady, but to condemn you to the most rigorous punishment due to those who conspire against country and king—traitors of the worst kind.”

“Lead me to the altar of sacrifice, *Ayya*. Do you wish me to lay my head on the block? I’m ready and willing.”

“*Cheche*—a paltry end, I assure you. The illustrious scion of Kodumbalur Velirs to suffer decapitation on a stone? Perish the thought, my dear, for your gracious self deserves a sentence befitting your noble station. Kindly look over there—do you see that elephant, yonder?”

Vanathi turned obediently, discerning the pitch-black form at once. The massive animal loomed out of the darkness, rising above her like a hillock, smooth as though carved out of stone and coated liberally with the inky black *mai* used to beautify eyes, to boot. Two long ivory tusks curved outwards, as though to further emphasize its blackness.

“Doubtless you know the tale of Gajendra’s salvation, my girl,” came the Mudhanmandhiri’s assured voice. “The great God Thirumaal harkened to the frantic prayers of an elephant and rushed to free His devotee from the murderous clutches of a crocodile, thus awarding Gajendran the ultimate glory: blessed *moksham*—salvation. In return, this elephant standing quietly has played its part in delivering a great many people to the abode of Thirumaal Himself and, well … you mentioned awhile ago, did you not, about wishing to leave this world and enter the next? Our massive friend will fulfill your glorious ambition within the blink of an eye. A moment to wind his trunk around you; a swift, high throw—and you will find that you have landed in the divine world of *moksham* itself!”A rich, amused chuckle.

Aniruddhar’s derisive laugh prickled Vanathi’s skin, already flushed with perspiration. *This is no man but a beast; a demon wearing human skin*, raced her thoughts, anxious, nervous; uneasy.

“I find myself forced to make one last attempt; a final plea, *Komagalae*. Which would you prefer? Divulge the refuge of Ponniyin Selvan? Or attain salvation with the aid of Gajendra’s trusty trunk?” Aniruddhar was the very epitome of suave charm. “Well?”

Vanathi, whose heart had begun thudding uncontrollably as he began to speak, found her terror receding as his question ended. “Will you command Gajendran to come to me, *Ayya*?” She demanded with a creditable assumption of daring. “Or would you rather I went to him?”

Aniruddhar gestured with his hand and spoke something in an incomprehensible language; she could not decipher the words. The

elephant seemed to have no difficulty in understanding him however; it approached her with slow, ponderous steps that seemed to shake the world.

Closer—closer—closer …

And then, suddenly, it was by her side. A muscular trunk wound itself around the princess's slender body, softer and infinitely more delicate than a blossom—and raised her from the ground.

Vanathi lived through several lifetimes during those short, protracted moments. A hundred, a thousand thoughts blazed through her fevered brain, rising and crashing like unruly waves upon a battered shore. A part of her could not but marvel at her own composure, her courage in such a terrifying situation; ah, she'd lost count of the times Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi had laughed at her for being such a coward, a scared chit of a girl—*but how surprised she'd be if she could see me now,* Vanathi mused, in a detached fashion. Some day, she shall know of all that happened here; it could hardly escape her attention. *And she shall know of my bravery in renouncing my life for Ponniyin Selvar—who knows, she might even share the memory with the prince*. What would be his sentiments? One thing was certain though: he'd be sure to rate Kodumbalur Velaar's daughter higher than that wretched boat-girl, wouldn't he?

The elephant's trunk rose higher and higher and in its grasp, so did Vanathi. *That demon in human guise, that brammaraakshasan is right*, the words chased around her chaotic, confused brain. *Gajendran is certain to fling me right into moksham—here it comes—any moment now —I wonder how far I'll be thrown? Not that that matters; I shan't be conscious to feel anything—and by the time I am, I shall be dead*!

By now she was directly aloft, almost right above the pachyderm's massive forehead. Panic suffused her; she shut her eyes tight.

The elephant twirled his long trunk, preparing to fling her far, far away. Vanathi's terror reached a fever pitch, tipping her into dizziness and then, by the divine grace of God …

… she lost consciousness.

40
Anaimangalam

One of our heroines, Vanathi, has been industriously cultivating the habit of fainting at a moment's notice, hasn't she? We beg our esteemed readers to bear with her just this once for circumstances have altered: her recovery from this debilitating disease is not far off.

The first few moments after Vanathi regained consciousness were confusing in the extreme, for she seemed to be rocking in almost rhythmic fashion. Immediately, a plausible explanation offered itself: she must be journeying to a celestial abode through *vaanaveli*, the very heavens. *Rimrim*!—*jimjim*! sang a gentle drizzle; *gup*!—*gup*! blew the wind in small bursts, chilling her body not unpleasantly. Vanathi shivered at the cool sensation; *fair enough*, she thought in detached fashion, *I'm travelling across the sky, breezing through clouds laden with moisture*. Inky blackness surrounded her, relieved only sporadically by blinding flashes of lightning.

Vague memories of the Mudhanmandhiri's last, terrifying talk of Gajendra's salvation, and the elephant twining a massive trunk around her now rose in her muddled memory. *Well, his predictions certainly came true, for my time on earth is done and I'm ascending to moksham, the abode of eternal bliss,* she mused hazily. *I shall see a great many Devas and Devis, celestial gods and goddesses, ethereal beings inhabiting a magical realm—*

—except him; the most divine of them all; the most magnificent of the Devas and the lord of my heart; my love, my everything—I shall not see ***him****, there. Why heaven at all, then? What would be the purpose of salvation; of eternal, unending bliss without him*?

Adede, the swaying, swinging motion seems to have gotten worse—I'm almost being thrown about from side to side … but stay, my headrest is warm; soft. Like my mother's lap—or of someone dearer, who lavished far more affection upon me—Ilaiya Piratti … ah, I wonder what

Kundhavai Devi is doing in Pazhaiyarai at this moment? Would news about me have reached her by this time?

Floating across the skies through clouds, the *megha mandalam*, to *moksham* was all very well—*but what sort of mount am I on? The mythical pushpaka vimanam, vehicle of the Gods? Iravatham perhaps, the legendary elephant of Devendran? Appa! The very mention of the animal is rather frightening—its mammoth size and the pliant, winding trunk and oh, the strength in that long muscle—well, what's done was done; there's hardly any point in grief or even fear, is there?*

Still, I wonder why this headrest is soft as the smoothest silk? The pitch blackness makes it impossible for me to see a thing—but stay, I could stretch my hands a little and … ah! That did feel like a silk curtain. And it seems a bit wet too.

Wait—this hand that touches me—fingers that caress my cheeks, delicate as jasmine flowers—whose could—?

"Vanathi—Vanathi?"

"Is—is it you indeed, *Akka*?"

"Who else could it be?"

"Are you coming with me to *moksham* as well?"

"This unseemly haste for salvation—! Have you wearied so much of this world, my girl, that you're panting to enter the next?"

"Where else are we going then?"

"Heavens! Forgotten that we're on our way to Anaimangalam, have you?"

"Wait—which place? Could you kindly repeat the name?"

"Well, really! To Anaimangalam we go, my dear—and merrily, merrily, on an *anai*, an elephant, to boot."

"*Ayyo*! An elephant?"

“Why do you tremble, little idiot? Have you started quaking at their very mention now? Is that your latest terror?”

“Did I—did I fall asleep before, *Akka*?”

“Who wouldn’t, with this animal’s swaying, rhythmic, motion, calculated to make anyone drowsy? You floated away into delightful dreams, upon its richly decorated royal *ambaari*.”

“Hardly delightful, *Akka*—rather, a horrifying nightmare!”

“So it seemed; your mutterings were worse than ever.”

“What—what did I say?”

“*Kaalaamukars*! *Sacrifice*! *Gajendra Moksham*! *An elephant’s trunk!* And then you crowned the nonsense with a barrage of compliments for Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar, including a great many loving epithets such as *Devil; Evil Wretch* … not that you were far wrong, mind you; that Brahmaraayar deserves all this and more. Had he heard your liberal curses, my girl, sleep would’ve deserted him for weeks!”

“Was—was all that truly just a dream, *Akka*?”

“I’ve no idea if it was truly a dream or falsely a nightmare for I know not its substance, in the first place.”

“I—I was kidnapped by Kaalaamukars and then the Mudhanmandhiri questioned me about the secret regarding the Prince and I refused and then he commanded the elephant to fling me to death—I was so brave then, *Akka*; I didn’t feel even a twinge of fear … and I couldn’t help but remember you—and oh, how I wished you’d been there to see my courage—!”

“A show of valour in your dreams at least; I’m content.”

Vanathi stayed silent for a while—but only for a while. “I simply cannot believe it!” Burst out an exclamation drenched in disbelief.

“What can’t you believe, pray?”

“That it was all just a dream—”

“There are such, believe me; dreams so real, so lifelike that you’re confused about your own perception when you wake up. I certainly have been—more than once.”

“Have you? What sort have *you* had?”

“Not that I have any compunction in revealing the truth to you, my girl: my brother appears often, once I’m asleep. You know for a fact that it’s been months since he left for Ilankai and yet, I close my eyes at night and he appears, complete to a shade—”

“Blessed are you indeed, *Akka*.”

“Indulge those vaunted sentiments if you wish, but you can have no idea of my grief, my mind’s chaotic confusion ever since I heard of him jumping into the sea.”

“Then—that was not just a terrifying nightmare?”

“How wonderful if it had been just that, my dear. But no, every part of that report was true for there was an eye witness—and when he delivered the appalling news himself, what could one do but believe it?”

“You speak of the Vaanar warrior, I understand—but wasn’t there anything else related to the prince? Nothing ...” there was a pause. “Nothing about a boat-girl and—and the monastery in Naagaippattinam?”

“That’s certainly an elaborate nightmare you’ve had—and now that I remember, there *was* some mention of Poonguzhali and Choodamani Viharam in your drowsy ramblings—also, a farrago of nonsense about becoming a *bhikshuni*! Pray, what’s your grievance with worldly life that you must needs renounce it?”

“Don’t you know me, *Akka*, and—and my heart? Don’t you know what lies beneath—ah, what else could life hold for me once I’d heard that he’d been taken by the sea? I wish—I even wish that horrifying elephant had flung me to my death, just as in my nightmare—”

“Good God, you wretch—what of my fate if you too are ripped from my side?”

“Your state is different, *Akka*; you—”

“Certainly it is; after all, you care for Arulmozhi far more than I ever could, don’t you?”

“That wasn’t what I meant, *Akka*. Only that I possess nothing like your strength of mind and after his death—”

“*Chee*! What sort of ominous words are these? Why conjecture about his demise? You don’t know it for certain, do you? The Pazhuvettarayars, their precious Ilaiya Rani and that fool of a Madhuranthakan may prance about in delight, bleating such tidings—but why should you and I? Or even consider such a dreadful eventuality, pray?”

“But then—I, I don’t understand; what on earth do you mean? What else could be the outcome of—of jumping into the raging ocean during a furious gale? Wouldn’t he have revealed himself at some point, if he’d survived?”

“My sweet, deluded little fool. Does plunging into the sea necessarily indicate drowning?”

“Surely it would be no secret if he’d climbed ashore?”

“You ought to be familiar with my father’s history by now: there was a period during his youth when his whereabouts were completely unknown for months. He was found eventually, and crowned heir to the throne. My grandfather, having demonstrated his valour in the Thakkolam field, simply vanished off the face of the earth and it was years before we finally stumbled upon him, as well. Hark, Vanathi!—Mother Ponni saved my brother once before, when he tumbled into the river; Samudhra Rajan would’ve ensured Ponniyin Selvan’s safety this time too. There exist an hundred islands between our coast and Ilankai; it’s entirely possible, I should think, for Arulmozhi to have been washed ashore any one of those. To tell you the truth my dear, that was the purpose of my journey with you in tow: to ensure a vigorous, diligent

search and rescue operation. Not that you seem to remember any of this, and I don't blame you for a moment: what remains of your brain seems to have been scrambled ever since we received news of the prince; it's only now that you've regained some clarity of thought and speech."

The Kodumbalur princess preserved her silence for a while, before posing another question. "Where did you say we were going, *Akka*?"

"Anaimangalam."

"And where is that?"

"By the shore, in the vicinity of Naagaippattinam. That Choodamani Viharam you were blubbering about in your sleep is actually close by, too; a vast convenience, I assure you, should you still persist on becoming a *bikshuni*. Still, I'd rather you didn't transform into a present-day Manimekalai just at once," Kundhavai's voice was warm with affection. "Wait until we've learnt Ponniyin Selvan's fate for sure, would you?"She allowed herself a gurgle of amusement.

"You laugh—how *could* you, *Akka*? To even think of merriment at such a moment—I don't know *how* you can … are you so sure that the prince has survived?"

"I could hardly be thus if I weren't, Vanathi. Surely not all the astrologers I've consulted could be wrong; not every prediction I've received could prove false—and neither shall the conch and discus lines upon his blessed palm … for so far, everything has been going exactly as it should."

"It has?" Vanathi was all at sea. "I'm afraid I really don't see it—"

"I'm not surprised; you've been dawdling about for ages, afflicted with the worst form of *siththabramai*, haven't you? I've been warned about the many perils that shall endanger Arulmozhi in his youth and if every such prediction has come true so far, surely the rest ought to be fulfilled as well?"

"What does that mean—the rest?"

“I’ve lost count of the times I’ve listed them and having listened with your mouth agape, you ask me yet again,” Kundhavai shook her head. “Sleep, now; we’ll see to the rest at dawn.”

Vanathi submitted to this dictum once more and sank into deep thought, before curiosity raised its stubborn head—naturally. “Are we really to travel all night on this elephant, *Akka*?” She put forth. “Why?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember our reasons either: travel during the day would mean appearing in public; we’d be surrounded by hordes of people, all demanding answers to the questions uppermost in their collective consciousness: *Where is Ponniyin Selvan? Where is the apple of our eye—where is our precious prince, the fulfillment of Chozha Nadu’s devout penance?* Arrows of blame shall hurtle towards the Pazhuvettarayars; curses shall rain upon the Ilaiya Rani; not even the Chakravarthy might be exempt from cruel barbs—why must our ears be assaulted by such a barrage of abuse, pray? Not to mention the Pazhuvoor lords who’d be quick to point fingers at us for having roused Chozha subjects into rebellion … an accusation to which we needn’t submit on any account, which explains my intention to travel by night. All of which I clarified before we left Pazhaiyarai and yet here you are, blinking at me as if you don’t recall a thing—the result of a terrible mental affliction as I know well! I shall be forced to beg and plead with the holy *bikshus* of Choodamani Viharam to cure you of *siththabramai*, no doubt. But there’s time yet before we’re reduced to such measures—sleep now; I’m rather drowsy myself, but we’ve no choice except to take what ease we can tonight upon this heaving, swaying hillock,” Ilaiya Piratti concluded, wryly.

Clearly, the conversation was at an end; Vanathi sensed that nothing more could be wrung out of Kundhavai—not that she wanted to, at this point. Silence seemed the best option, for her heart was churning with confusion. Desperate to weave her tangled thoughts into order, she embarked upon a simple exercise: thinking through very single event that had happened, that evening.

It all seemed real enough, to her chaotic perception. *My mind isn’t afflicted, siththabramai or otherwise; it’s Akka who’s trying to drive me insane*, she told herself sometimes and yet, no matter how hard she tried to invoke memories subsequent to the elephant’s throw, there was …

just a vast emptiness. Nothing; she could remember nothing. What on earth *had* happened? Wait—

—Akka must have arrived at precisely the moment danger threatened Vanathi, and effected a rescue!

The Mudhanmandhiri must have quaked at the very sight of the princess, she decided. And yet—*surely it couldn't have been easy to release me from the clutches of a massive elephant, unless … what if it had happened thus?*

Was *this* the very elephant that had twined its sturdy trunk around her body?

Vanathi remembered that she'd been able to discern an *ambaari* despite the inky blackness—and perhaps Ilaiya Piratti had been within, that very moment. The animal must have simply deposited the Kodumbalur princess into the makeshift carriage instead of flinging her to the high heavens. The more Vanathi considered this sequence of events, the more convinced she grew of its possibility; royalty as she was, scenes where elephants were trained to accomplish precisely such things were familiar to her.

What puzzled her was *why*.

Had the Mudhanmandhiri and Ilaiya Piratti indeed been in league to conspire against her—for what purpose, though?

To halt my solitary journey of course, Vanathi realized. Doubtless, there was another reason for the elaborate deception: Ilaiya Piratti may have intended the abduction as a trial; a test to gauge her courage. Wasn't this the same redoubtable lady who'd arranged a complicated subterfuge involving stuffed crocodiles, after all?

Whatever her motive, she'd certainly been right about one thing: travelling alone had been an enormous error in judgment, Vanathi concluded. *Ah, what a relief to lie within the safety of an ambaari now, head resting upon Akka's lap? As for Ilaiya Piratti's endless encouragement—what a source of courage; how comforting her gracious*

words? Ponniyin Selvar was safe somewhere, no doubt; she would be sure to meet him … at the end of this voyage, perhaps?

A bolt of sheer, unadulterated delight shot through her at the very thought; she trembled with a blend of joy and anticipation—in marked contrast to wilting with intense, cloying depression just a while ago.

The elephant marched on its way, regal and majestic; its steps assured—and on its back swayed the *ambaari*, easing into its gentle rhythm while a compact regiment of bodyguards went before and behind the mount.

The steady downpour slowed to a drizzle and then faded away altogether.

Clouds cleared, revealing twinkling pinpoints in the velvety night sky.

Vanathi let her gaze drift lazily through the *ambaari*'s roof, at the winking stars, wondering if there could possibly be a connection between celestial bodies in the heavens and humans wandering upon earth.

Could there be—could there be some basis for all those astrologers' endless prattle about the compatibility of her horoscope's stars, and the prince's own? *Your son will rule all three worlds some day*, declared these selfsame *jothidars*, not to mention Akka herself; could their steadfast statements be rooted in truth?

The constant barrage of predictions about the comet being a portent; a fearful omen of something dreadful—a harbinger of disaster—could those possibly be true? How could one ever know?

And what sort of disaster *was* indicated, in any case?

Ponniyin Selvar's drowning in the sea? Had *that* been the projected calamity?

But if he did manage to survive as Akka confidently predicted, surely that couldn't be it? What else was foretold, then? What on earth was about to happen?

The hours passed; her thoughts grew hazy and indistinct as they swirled around formless, nameless conjectures and soon, her mind lost its hold on conscious thought, slipping into slumber.

Dawn had broken; birds launching into enthusiastic song at the beginning of another day when she finally stirred.

Ilaiya Piratti, wide awake herself and self-possessed as always, twitched aside the *ambaari*'s silk curtain and peered out. “Ah, here's Anaimangalam—and we're almost at the entrance of the royal Chozha residence,” she announced with satisfaction.

They disembarked and duly entered the palace, where awaited maids who led them on a tour of every section of the elaborately appointed residence. The royal inspection had to end at some point, though, and the princesses descended to the lower level and thence to the front of an ornately decorated terrace, where they could see the canal wending its way towards the sea.

“You mentioned search and rescue efforts for the prince, didn't you, *Akka*?” Vanathi enquired. “What arrangements have you made, exactly?”

“Indeed, the task has already begun,” Kundhavai answered. “There—I see a boat; its occupants might have news for us.”

Vanathi turned and peered, catching a glimpse, through gaps in tree branches, of a small craft—and two people nestled within. “Who are they, *Akka*?”

“The one handling the oars is Sendhan Amudhan—surely you remember him as the man we released some time ago, from the Thanjavur dungeons? The other, seated, is Poonguzhali, of course.”

A shudder ran through Vanathi. “I've no intention of meeting that woman, *Akka*,” she said, with some constraint. “I'd rather go in.”

“Good lord, my girl—I see no reason for such terror; surely she won't gobble you up?” Amusement laced Kundhavai's voice. “Set aside these panic attacks, and stay calm.”

The boat approached with every moment.

***

Vanathi might have disregarded her miraculous rescue for the time being, but there is no impediment to our revisiting the incident—and as it so happened, her second hypothesis was correct: the elephant had not flung her to her death, raising and depositing her gently, instead, near the *ambaari* where Kundhavai, ready to receive her precious charge drew her onto her lap and into a fervent embrace.

“I shall take my leave of you, *Devi*,” announced the Mudhanmandhiri, preparing to climb into his palanquin. “May your journey—and its conclusion—bring you good cheer.”

“I’m much obliged, *Ayya*, for your gracious assistance,” thanked Ilaiya Piratti.

“I seem to remember you mentioning something about the Kodumbalur *Komagal*’s debilitating cowardice,” a smile edged Aniruddhar’s lips. “That was not a flaw I witnessed today, my dear. In fact, far from it—never have I encountered such a mutinous, strong-willed maiden.”

“She *was* a terrified little mouse,” Kundhavai acknowledged. “The change you see is of rather recent date.”

“A result of your remarkable training, I doubt not. That young woman has likely stigmatized me a vengeful, wicked devil and consigned me to hell—not that that matters; worrying about the innumerable ways I am perceived by those within my orbit serves no useful purpose, I have discovered.” Aniruddhar’s palanquin prepared to depart. “Fare thee well.”

A skeleton force numbering a mere four soldiers accompanied the Mudhanmandhiri’s palanquin as it swiftly headed west, while the larger entourage consisting of elephants and horses took an easterly route.

***

A steady rain began within minutes of the Chief Minister’s departure, gradually intensifying into a downpour—a fact resolutely ignored by the bearers and guards who maintained their relentless pace. The deluge

weakened a little, finally tapering to a drizzle by the time the palanquin came to a halt.

“Why have you stopped, pray?” demanded the Mudhanmandhiri.

“There—under that tree,” pointed one of the sentries in front. “It looks like someone’s fallen!”

Aniruddhar peered with all his might in the direction of the man’s outstretched hand. Lightning flashed obligingly. “Why, so he has,” he murmured. “I had better go and see for myself, I suppose.” He stepped down and walked gingerly upon the wet ground towards the tree to hear low, pitiful moans. “Who is this?” demanded the Chozha minister.

“Is that the Mudhanmandhiri I hear?” returned a reply.

“Indeed it is. Now who lies in the mud?”

“Can you not recognize me, *Ayya*? It is I—Madhuranthakan!”

“Good heavens—what a state to find you in! How did you end up here—what happened, for God’s sake?” And a perturbed Aniruddhar tried to help Madhuranthakar rise to his unsteady feet.

•

41
Madhuranthakan‘s Gratitude

The faintest touch of the Mudhanmandhiri’s hand—and Madhuranthakan screamed. “*Ayyo*—*Appa*—please do not—I’m dying of pain—my legs—oh, they’re gone—oh, oh, *oh*!” The shrieks ended on a final crescendo of unbearable agony.

“Good heavens, Highness,” Aniruddhar abandoned all attempts at raising the hapless prince. “What on earth has happened to your legs?”

“They’re broken—I can’t walk—I can’t even *stand* on them!”

The Chief Minister turned to his men instantly, and snapped his fingers. “*Adei*, bring the palanquin over here right away.” That done, he turned his attention to Madhuranthakan again. “Pray, enlighten me as to this pitiful condition, *Ayya*: how came you to be here on such a night? Sprawled in the mud churned by pouring rain—where is your entourage for God’s sake? Such audacity, leaving you to your own devices—the worst punishment shall not suffice for this outrageous sin!”

“No one deserves to be punished, Mudhanmandhiri, for this was engineered by no man … rather, I set out this evening all alone on my horse, by the river, when rain came upon suddenly—a roar of thunder; a brilliant flash of lightning and my steed took fright, pelting helter-skelter … I was unfortunate enough to crash into a branch and fall; the horse galloped away; I know not where. I’m not sure if I sprained my ankle or broke it during the fall—but I could not even stand. Ah, Gods be praised indeed that you’re here at just the right moment!”

“Rather, the grace of the most puissant lord your father Kandaradhitha Thevar’s many penances. Grit your teeth a moment, your highness and bear the pain; my men and I shall assist you into the palanquin. There is time and more to discuss all once we reach this servant’s home in Nathan Kovil,” assured Aniruddhar.

The *pallakku* was duly brought forward and lowered; the prince raised, set inside solicitously by the older man, and allowed to recline. The bearers having been instructed to proceed gently, the Mudhanmandhiri followed on foot at a decorous pace.

The small cavalcade soon arrived at Nathan Kovil, also known by another, illustrious name: Sundara Chozha Vinnagaram where existed one of Aniruddhar's homes, in the vicinity of the village's Thirumaal temple. Prince Madhuranthakan was carried in with all possible care and laid with great ceremony upon the bed. An examination conducted in the freshly lamp-lit chamber confirmed that no bones were fractured; rather, the muscles merely sprained—and the prince's blind panic subsided, somewhat.

Offerings, *prasadham* delivered from the Vishnu *aalayam* nearby formed their repast for the night.

"Rest well, your highness," assured the Mudhanmandhiri, once the meal was at an end. "You may decide your next course of action come dawn. I, for my part, am on my way to Thanjai and shall be glad to offer my escort should you wish to travel thither."

"You've done me a great deal of harm thus far, *Ayya*—but your assistance has wiped the slate of your devious, wretched dealings. Redemption has cleansed you, tonight," Madhuranthakan assured, pompously. "Know that I shall not forget this; my eternal gratitude is yours. Should the opportunity to ascend the Chozha throne ever be mine …" he smiled slightly. "I shall retain your services as Chief Minister. There, you have my word on it."

"Such condescension almost unmans me, your highness, but …" Aniruddhar replied, in accents of well-simulated surprise. "This servant is bound to the Chozha dynasty, *Ayya*; to render members of this illustrious clan any assistance, either through body or brain, is no more than my sworn duty. You need feel no compulsion to return thanks for your due. And yet, you mentioned my devious, wretched dealings just now—words that I confess made no sense to me. I have no memory of having done you the slightest harm knowingly." The Mudhanmandhiri assumed an air of injured humility. "I must beg you to condescend further and explain my

misdemeanours, upon which I shall do what lies in my power to make reparations."

"*Ayya*, Oh Aniruddhar—great strategist; a giant amongst intellectuals—your incredible acumen is renowned; the whole world is awed at your flair for politics—but pray do not make a show of exhibiting your considerable talent; neither need you imagine that I'm unaware of the grievous harm you've caused me, so far. Still, I'm no stranger to magnanimity; I can forgive and forget all, considering the momentous assistance you've rendered this night. You must let me know how I may serve you, as an expression of gratitude—if there's anything I can do, to repay this debt."

"Indeed there is, your highness," a smile edged Aniruddhar's lips. "This doddering old man seeks a boon from your gracious self: do not embark on solitary horseback journeys ever, in the future. Rather, you may choose to travel with the entire strength of your considerable entourage before and behind—in fact, a palanquin would suit your purposes much better for these are uncertain times; the people are at boiling point, their fury roused to fever pitch—witness the pandemonium in Pazhaiyarai today, after all! A closed palanquin, mind you, rather than an open one—and if it happens to belong to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani, so much the better! No suspicion of your presence within would ever arise."

Madhuranthakan stared at the Chief Minister, nonplussed. The faintest trace of alarm flickered in his eyes. "What words are these, *Ayya*?" He demanded in a few moments, with a creditable assumption of self-control. "To suggest that I skulk about in—*why*? If it's your intention to offend—"

"It is news to me, my prince, that the very insinuation of occupying the Ilaiya Rani's *pallakku* could be a horrendous insult—at which point did you begin to consider it so? Was it not your veritable habit to travel thus, not so very long ago? But stay—I begin to see light: your return to good sense must date from your late sojourn in the Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar palace …"

"Mudhanmandhiri…" The panic that had blinded Madhuranthakan's wits some time ago raised its fearsome head again; his handsome

features were suffused by stark fear. “I—the Kadambur palace—I …” he stuttered, only to find that the words choked in his throat. “I—you—”

“I merely mention the occasion of your visit to said palace in company of the Lord Treasurer Periya Pazhuvettarayar on the auspicious eighteenth, the *Aadi Perukku*, your highness, undertaken in the Ilaiya Rani’s luxurious palanquin—a fact that I did not quite relish, I must admit; such equipages are best suited for decrepit old men such as myself while youngsters like you, still in the first flush of youth, ought to parade upon elephants or horses … but then, horse-riding requires a certain panache, not to mention a great deal of practice. Perhaps your highness would appreciate training, once your health is improved?”

“I must warn you, Anbil Aniruddhar, to cease belittling me any further; you seem to have taken it upon yourself to demean me in every way possible … and here I must mention that your assumption about my horse-riding skills—a conjecture based just upon my ill-fated excursion today—is completely unfounded, as is your laughable theory that one journey in the Pazhuvoor Rani’s palanquin implies a whole host of others. Still, I possess a wellspring of patience, you see, that allows me to desist from punishing you, keeping in mind your advanced age and your timely service—”

“Thy humble servant is properly abashed at this show of goodwill, my prince; your overflowing wellspring of virtue is the source of great joy, for have not our ancestors ruled that *Patience shall bequeath the earth*? Not to mention the sage words of Tamilagam’s greatest treasure:

“Akazhvaaraith thaangum nilam polath thammai

Ikazhvaarp poruthal thalai.”

Our venerable mother earth not only patiently endures the sharp, painful implements of diggers—but also rewards them with pure water, the source of all life! A valuable trait, especially in those who wish to rule this selfsame earth. And you, now in a similar position, ought to be able to tolerate the—er—opprobrious words of a man in his twilight years—”

“What’s this, *Ayya*—you dare accuse me of an eye to the Chozha *samrajyam*?” Madhuranthakan’s lips trembled with emotion; his brows

twitched, and it was obvious that his nervous trepidation was fast morphing into wrath fuelled by fear.

Aniruddhar remained unfazed at this fine show of temper. “Accusation, your highness? But surely royal aspirations are no crime for a scion of that warrior among warriors, Vijayalaya Chozhan; the precious son of Kandaradhithar, great Saivite saint and the very embodiment of piety—I know of no one who deserves this throne as much your illustrious self; why must your desire be considered sacrilege? The argument I put forth, therefore, is this: as an acknowledged claimant, there can be no necessity to engage in clandestine plots to seize power; neither need you give credence to those who goad you into them. Lend me your ears, my prince; I beg you heed my advice: your parents’ ambitions for you were different and once, you were content to follow their path, devoting yourself to Siva Peruman. Now, however, you have experienced a change of sentiment—not that that should automatically incur either criticism or accusation. You are legally authorized to stake your claim before the public; yours is also the right to submit such a claim to the Chakravarthy himself … which obviates the necessity to stumble all alone on a pitch dark *Amavaasai* night to gatherings on the Kollidam banks, in a vain attempt to enlist Kaalaamukar support. Neither need you conspire with lords like a band of thieves in Kadambur Sambuvaraiyar’s palace at midnight, bent on devious, criminal proceedings. Far from standing for you, the men who offer such dangerous counsel cannot be anything but your sworn enemies, bent on your ultimate destruction!”

Madhuranthakan now found himself floundering in a morass of confused, chaotic thoughts. His astonishment at the Mudhanmandhiri’s complete awareness of events of which he had blissfully imagined everyone to be in happy ignorance, was boundless—but only for a moment: surprise and confusion gave way to a blind, irrational panic which soon transformed into seething fury.

“I cannot but wonder at how these incidents ever came to your notice *Ayya*,” he gritted out, trying in vain to retain his composure which was in tatters, now. “Which wretched traitor—which sorry excuse for a man—has stood by me all along in the guise of a friend and tattled to you?”

“An exercise in futility to engage in that quest; my eyes are omnipresent, existing in every corner of this wide *rajyam* and so are my ears. Nothing can happen in this kingdom without my knowledge, after all.”

“I must assume that the Chakravarthy is aware, too, of everything?” Madhuranthakan demanded.

“Your assumption would be erroneous; he knows nothing. The countless secrets garnered by my eyes and ears lie buried in my heart—only to be released into the world in case of dire necessity; else, they shall never see the light of day—”

“Indeed; your heart is a deep ocean of devilish, horrifying secrets that would bring the entire *samrajyam* to its knees if ever exposed, I’m sure.” A sudden shift in Madhuranthakan’s voice; there was now a note of deceit, of malice that had not been in evidence, thus far.

If the canny Mudhanmandhiri took note, he chose not to draw attention to it. “The Chakravarthy is a dear friend; yet, I harbour secrets of which even he is unaware. Sundara Chozhar’s health, as you well know, has been mauled by illness; imagine his plight if his mind, equally torn asunder for various reasons, should now be made aware that the lords of his own realm conspired against him. I could not, in all conscience; nor was there any need to do so. Rest assured, your highness, that not a word of your doings shall reach the Chakravarthy’s ears from my lips.”

“That the most puissant minister, the greatest mind of our times, the most noble Anbil Aniruddhar should suddenly decide to uphold the cause of a pathetic human being such as myself passes all comprehension, I admit.” Madhuranthakan’s faint laughter was tinged with contempt. “May I know the reason for this sudden show of loyalty, *Ayya*?”

“Not a show, my prince, and certainly not sudden; my loyalty for you was no different to what I harboured for the two sons of Sundara Chozhar—a sentiment, regretfully, that had no way of revealing itself before now –”

“For which an opportunity fortuitously occurred, tonight—by an errant horse that led to my falling ignominiously into a ditch, and breaking my bones. Had this happened mere days ago, your noble self would’ve wrung my neck and made sure of my death under that very tree without the slightest compunction—”

“Narayana—Narayana! That I should listen to such an accusation—pray, why, your highness?”

“You’d do well to heed your own advice, *Ayya*, and not fall prey to erroneous assumptions about my character. I’m no ignorant stripling to believe everything anyone says; nor am I a complete ignoramus, living in a deluded world of shadows.” Madhuranthakan sat up. “You see, I *know* you … a man who tried to conspire against me even as I lay in my mother’s womb—you’d planned to snuff out my life even as I arrived into this world—ah! I see a sign of incredulous surprise upon your features … you’re wondering how I know all this, aren’t you? Let me tell you this, then: you’re not the only one in the Chozha *samrajyam* harbouring devilish, terrifying secrets!”

For the first time during the admittedly one-sided conversation, Aniruddhar’s usually suave mask slipped; his face lost its hard, knowing expression, reflecting a variety of emotions—emotions that flickered and vanished swiftly. Having lost control for a moment, he had to expend a good deal of effort in assuming his usual, urbane front. “You are wise beyond your years, your highness,” Aniruddhar answered, finally, a determined smile firmly set in place. “Unwarranted arrogance is a sin, and I was indeed guilty of it—now, however, I realize that my so-called knowledge is as nothing; I am properly chastised. Were I indeed guilty of plotting your assassination as an infant—the terrible crime of *sisuhathi*, as you imply—could you kindly enlighten me as to how you escaped that fate? Revealing that secret would enrich my starved soul; make me a *krithaarthan*, in fact.”

“Still seek to test the extent of my knowledge, I see.” The look Madhuranthakan threw him was indulgent. “Fair enough; I’ve no objection. Once the child was born, the assassins you employed snatched it away without even pausing to ascertain the gender; when the discovery was made, eventually, that the newborn was a girl, you were informed; you gave her away to a temple priest with instructions to raise

her as his own. I was born half a *naazhigai* after the girl's birth—something you hadn't expected in the slightest. My horoscope ensured my survival; I held on grimly to life then, and during the years that followed—no thanks to your conspiracies to mould me into a spineless weakling obsessed with Siva Peruman: a lunatic, in fact. I'll have to hand it to you: your earlier disappointment notwithstanding, you refused to give up your efforts to keep me from the throne. Still, you failed to scramble my brains with *Sivabakthi*—I managed to retain some of my wits at least … well, most revered Mudhanmandhiri? Why do you sit there as though *your* wits have gone begging? Why don't you deny every one of my allegations? Stunned astonishment ill becomes you."

In truth, the Chief Minister of Chozha Nadu was paralyzed—so taken aback had he been at Madhuranthakan's searing responses. His legendary self-assurance, however, soon asserted itself. "I see no point in futile denials, your highness, in the face of your knowledge," he admitted finally.

"Futile, indeed. As for your sudden softening of stance in my favour—don't think I don't know your reasons: your dislike of Aditha Karikalan is no secret; you'd planned to set Arulmozhi Varman upon the Chozha throne … but the sea sealed his fate, and you're left protesting your loyalty to me! Still, you will not find me ungenerous for I've every intention of forgetting all the harm you've done me—if anything, you shall find me grateful for your assistance tonight. Swear fealty to my cause," Madhuranthakan's eyes glittered. "And I would even re-instate you as my Chief Minister, once I've ascended the throne!"

"Your gracious words cast me into transports of delight, your highness," replied Anbil Aniruddha Brahmaraayar, his voice husky with emotion.

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42
The Fever Subsides

Within Naagai's famed Choodamani Viharam lay Ponniyin Selvan, upon a wooden bed in a room adjacent to that of the Acharya *bikshu*.

Three days raged the terrible ague that ravaged his body, plunging him into unconsciousness for much of this time.

The monks nursed him most diligently during this period, dosing him with medicine at required intervals and making sure that he received the necessary fluids, by pouring water into his mouth frequently.

Despite the soaring temperature, consciousness did surface at rare intervals, when he tried to make sense of his surroundings; the elaborate mural on the wall opposite caught his misty eyes—for it was populated by a great many *Devas*, *Gandharvas* and even celestial beings such as *Yakshas*. Some made sweet music, accompanying themselves upon instruments; others waved rich white, feathery fans—traditional and royal *vensaamarams*—while a few held aloft beautiful white state umbrellas. Further away floated ethereal beings with large plates overflowing with colourful blossoms of every variety. So perfectly rendered was the scene; so lifelike the *Devas* that after a few such viewings—viewings spent gazing intently at the mural—he decided that he'd arrived, finally, at *Devalokham*, abode of the Gods. They were all here, he mused—*Devas*, *Yakshas* and *Kinnaras*, heavenly beings spun out of the very air and light—to welcome him into their world!

How had he come here, though?

Dense Thaazhai hedges. Bursting with the heady, overpowering fragrance of golden Thaazhai blooms. His journey to heaven had been along a gentle stream lined with perfection and perfume—and it seemed to him that the sweet, cloying scent surrounded him now, at the very memory of that journey. There had been a Devakumaran in the boat as well, a celestial escort—as well as a goddess. The male appeared

devoted to Siva Peruman, for he raised his clear voice and sang Thevaram hymns at times and as for the celestial nymph, the Devakumari—what had *she* done? Nothing in the way of song, but she'd uttered a word or two at times and that had been enough to establish a musical voice, by far more melodious than heavenly harmony. Then there had been her exquisite eyes, casting warm, tender glances at him often—where were the duo, now?

One had to wonder, though, if Buddhist monks were offered pride of position in paradise on par with the *Devas*, *Yakshas* and *Kinnaras*; were they, perhaps, the custodians of the legendary receptacle of nectar? For a certain *bikshu* approaches him often, pours a few luscious drops of the heavenly liquid, *amudham* into his mouth and leaves at once—*whatever the phenomenal luxuries of Devalokham, water seems to be at a premium for I'm permanently possessed by a demon of thirst. Couldn't this blessed bikshu not practice parsimony quite so much, and offer a little more of nectar? Surely heaven needn't be a bastion of splendid miserliness? Why on earth were people so stingy even* ***here***?

Perhaps they had their reasons—perhaps nectar ought not to be guzzled by the gallon … or wasn't this *amudham* at all but some sort of liquor—*chee*! Surely Buddhist monks wouldn't even touch spirits, let alone pour them industriously into his mouth? *But why do I feel so faint*, he wondered vaguely. *Why does blackness grow at the edges of my vision; why does consciousness vanish within moments of drinking nectar* …?

Three days of drifting between the abode of the Gods and a black vacuum of unconsciousness … and on the morning of the fourth day, Ponniyin Selvan finally roused awake in full possession of his wits, as though from a deep, refreshing sleep. His convalescence was not complete; his body still weak—but his mind was clear, at last. Realization set in that the wondrous celestial beings on the wall opposite were merely figurines in a mural; those ethereal *Devas*,*Yakshas* and *Kinnaras*, their faces glowing with unearthly joy hadn't assembled in such numbers to welcome him but the Bhagavan, ascending to Devalokham—and ah, over there! On another wall was a splendid painting of Buddhar himself rising from Earth, stepping into heaven through swirling masses of clouds.

It didn't take long for him to understand that his present residence was a Buddhist *viharam*—but which one, though, and where?

Pursuing this train of thought led him directly to a series of events beginning in Ilankai; his journey and its consequences, ending with Vandhiyathevan and himself in the sea, flailing desperately, swimming or trying to, anyway, finally just floating, hands limp and heavy; exhausted beyond measure. After that … just a jumble of chaotic, fragmented memories that made little sense.

He'd gotten thus far when a *bikshu* entered the chamber with the expected nectar in his hands, approached the young man and subjected him to keen scrutiny. The prince took the cup from him and peered into it. Whatever this liquid, it certainly was not the food of the Gods, he decided; likely medicine, or medicine mixed with milk. "Where am I, *Swami*?" He enquired. "Who are you? How many days have I lain here?"

The *bikshu* departed without a word, walking, instead, into the next room. "The fever has receded, Acharya; consciousness has returned fully," his words floated to the prince.

A monk considerably advanced in years entered the chamber within a while, approached the bed and observed its occupant, in the manner of his predecessor. "Ponniyin Selva," he began, his face brightened by what he saw. "You are now within Choodamani Viharam at Naagai; it has been three days since you arrived, afflicted with the terrible ague. How providential that we were in a position to nurse you to health! We are fortunate, indeed."

"So am I, for I've cherished a desire to visit this monastery for a while now—but the most I could manage was a fleeting view from outside, ages ago, on my way to the port. How wonderful that I should end up staying here … but could you tell me *how* that happened, Swami?"

"I must beg your highness to kindly drink the medicine in your hands, before I divulge all I know."

"This is no medicine but divine nectar," admitted the prince, once he had obliged. "I've no doubt that you went above and beyond your call of

duty in dragging me back from the jaws of death—not that I'm grateful, you understand."

A faint smile edged the Acharya's lips. "You need be burdened with no such sentiment, my prince. Our divine lord Buddha Bhagavan has ordained that nursing the sick is the most blessed service, *Paramothama Dharmam*; our tenets require us to care for even diseased animals, which means offering you medical assistance was of no great moment. If anything, we are indebted to the Chozha dynasty, for your father Sundara Chozha Chakravarthy, and your sister, the most gracious Ilaiya Piratti have patronized our faith a great deal. Your efforts to renovate the crumbling Buddhist monasteries of Anuradhapuram are not unknown, either. You will understand now, your highness, our reasons for not expecting anything in return—"

"You mistake my meaning, Acharya; I wasn't speaking of gratitude in that sense. I'm not exactly unaware of the severity of this fever—I've seen the horrendous fate of afflicted men with my own eyes, in Ilankai. I ought to have ascended to *Devalokham* by rights, being welcomed by *Devas*, *Kinnaras* and other marvelous celestial beings, oughtn't I? Wouldn't I be enjoying a wonderful time by now, gorging on divine *amudham* in their glorious company? But you've ruined that fate by practically snatching me from the pearly gates of heaven, condemning me instead to a world brimming with earthly sorrows. It's my conclusion that you've done me no signal service—which explains why I don't feel very grateful."

The Acharya *bikshu*'s delight was complete; his face shone with a mixture of relief, joy, and genuine amusement. "When the time should come for you to ascend to heaven, Ponniyin Selva, there is no doubt whatsoever that you shall be welcomed by Devendran himself, and a host of celestial beings upon their *vimanams*, showering you with fragrant blossoms—but that time, I am glad to say is far away, for there is much for you to accomplish in this world: a great many wondrous deeds and illustrious tasks … surely celestial abodes ought not even to be considered until they are all complete?"

The prince, reclining upon his bed until now, suddenly sat straight. His handsome features glowed; lightning fairly flashed from eyes bright with the sudden perception of purpose—waves of pure energy radiated

from him, spreading through the entire chamber as though they could not be contained another moment. “Indeed, you speak the truth, Acharya,” words tripped off his eager tongue. “There is work yet to be done in this world; noble deeds of great account—countless tasks of immense proportions … hark: I glimpsed the exterior of this selfsame *viharam* once; also, later, Anuradhapuram’s famed *sthupams* and monasteries—and I swear to you now that I shall renovate this holy site along the same magnificent proportions of Ilankai’s Abayagiri Viharam; I shall establish massive statues of Buddha as impressive as the ones on that isle—and not just those; I intend to construct and renovate huge temples in honour of Siva Peruman in this very Chozha Nadu … ah! When I compare the phenomenal, awe-inspiring structures, the famed columns and shrines of Ilankai with our own puny, pitiful temples, my heart shrinks with shame. There shall come a time when I build a temple of magnificence—of such beauty and proportions in Thanjavur that its *gopuram* touches the sky; the idol of Mahadevar that graces such a temple shall also be of monumental dimensions—I swear to you, Acharya, that Buddhist *sthupams* and stupendous temples shall compete with one another in piercing the very heavens; men and women born a thousand years hence shall gaze at these imposing structures, stunned at the delicate beauty and massive proportions of these wondrous edifices—!”

The words were as a torrent, spurred by a divine force that had found its instrument—but the inspired speech had its price: the prince, who had been sitting ramrod straight all this while suddenly sagged with exhaustion, strength sapped by his vision.

The Acharya was quick to grip his shoulders, laying the young man down slowly, taking especial care that his head sustained no injury upon the wooden headrest. “Time and more to accomplish these magnificent tasks in the days to come, my prince,” he soothed, his hands caressing the patient’s forehead gently. “Your health takes precedence now. Rest, I beg you, and allow your body to heal.”

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43
The Nandhi Mandapam

Acharya *bikshu* arrived again the next afternoon; a fact that pleased Ponniyin Selvan, for he could barely contain his eagerness to put forth a great many questions. His efforts at pumping the junior monk for information had yielded no result. “Acharya shall make known all, *Ayya*,” was the standard response no matter what the question; the prince had to tamp down his impatience and be content with that.

“How fare thee today, highness?” was the *bikshu*’s first question.

Back came a veritable torrent of answers. “Very ill, *Ayya*, for my body simply refuses to lie still. *Why do you loll in bed*, it harangues me,” grinned Ponniyin Selvan. “*Get up! Climb a horse and ride like the wind—grapple with a tusker’s powerful muscles—jump into a river and fight the roaring current!* And then it goads my stomach as well; the young *bikshu*’s meagre portions yesterday were barely enough. I can scarce believe that I’d been unconscious for so long, weakened by this ague, Acharya. What a marvelous medicine is yours indeed, that there should be no sign of that terrible fever now!”

“And yet, *Ayya*, you would do well to ignore your recovering body’s outrageous impulses; a relapse at this point would bode ill. Very ill, indeed.”

“I can’t say that the thought of further danger concerns me, to tell the truth—”

“So you may say, but what of the hundreds of thousands of Chozha citizens even now lamenting your fate, my prince? Cities, towns, villages—the entire kingdom has been in the torturous grip of sorrow and pandemonium—ah, if you could have only seen scores of people weeping and wailing, from young children to old, doddering men—”

“This makes no sense at all—why the intense grief, pray? Did they assume that I might not survive such a terrifying fever, perhaps? But

surely everyone knows that the *bikshus* of Choodamani Viharam have been caring for me like the apple of their eye? Why must they mourn so?"

"Alas, your highness—your residence here and by extension, your convalescence is not common knowledge. Were it so, would this *viharam* be such a haven of peace? Wouldn't the entire city have demolished the *viharam* itself for a glimpse of you? Had you been in a position to listen to the grievous wails—the people's heart-wrenching lament the day news arrived of your drowning … ah, was there a soul within this very monastery that did not shed a tear?"

"But—I'm afraid I really don't understand," Ponniyin Selvan straightened on his bed. "News of my *drowning*, Gurudeva? When did it arrive, and through whom? Why deliver such a horrifying report anyway?"

"I know not the identity of its bearer, except that such news was all over the city; you were known to have boarded a ship that was destroyed by a whirlwind, mid-sea. Soon word had spread like wildfire that your corpse was not to be found despite the best search and rescue efforts of *Dhanaadhikaari* Pazhuvettarayar along Kodikkarai's shores … and therefore, you surely ought to have drowned. Why, I myself, having listened to this tale at the *viharam*'s gates, was lost in sorrow and regret—but a junior *bikshu* appeared at just that precise moment with curious news: a small craft had arrived along the canal behind the monastery that very instant, with a patient. I hastened there at once and discovered that this was none other than your gracious self. Three days of intense nursing saw your return to consciousness just yesterday."

"Who brought me here in a boat, Acharya?" The prince's voice held a hint of urgency. "Could you tell me?"

"A young man and a *yuvathi*, a maiden."

"I seem to remember—some faint memory of such a journey … as though in a dream. And my escorts? Do you know their identity? The young man wasn't Vandhiyathevan of the Vaanar clan, was he?"

“No. He introduced himself as Sendhan Amudhan; a man of piety, of *Sivabakthi*, it seemed to me. Of the maiden’s name I am ignorant, but she seemed to possess excellent physique and mental fortitude—”

“That description is more than enough: likely Poonguzhali, Thyaga Vidangar’s daughter. But—what about their reason for bringing me here?”

“That, I regret to say, was not revealed to me; nor did I care to ask.”

“You didn’t inform anyone of my safe residence here, then?”

“Your escorts were intent on impressing upon me that your presence could not be advertised … and having taken your perilous health into consideration, I too found it judicious to concur.”

“It seems to me that there’s some sort of treachery here, Acharya … the very reason for my journey from Ilankai was in obedience to the command of my father, the thrice-crowned Chakravarthy himself—but a great many events occurred in the meantime … do you know, I do believe that rumours of my drowning were spread in an attempt to accuse me of disobeying the emperor’s express orders—granting me asylum amounts to betrayal; keeping me here is high treason, Gurudeva! Pray dispatch me to Thanjavur at once—”

“Should I be consigned to the fate reserved for traitors, my prince, for the unimaginable crime of harbouring your gracious self, I shall be cast into transports of delight. Nothing shall gladden my heart more; I shall not regret saving you even if this ancient, illustrious Choodamani Viharam was razed to the ground and reduced to rubble—”

“Your magnanimity humbles me, Acharya—but how could you have taken me in without the slightest suspicion or enquiry?”

“Surely there was no need for doubts and deliberations; there can be nothing more virtuous for monks such as ourselves than to welcome and care for you, afflicted with the fearsome ague. There was another reason besides: your blessed sister Kundhavai Devi had intimated much before that you might be obliged to seek refuge for a few days.”

“Oh, did she? Ilaiya Piratti communicated in so many words, then? When was this?”

“A few days before your arrival—and Sendhan Amudhan, one of your escorts, corroborated it as well.”

“Did both my trusted guards leave right away, Gurudeva? Would it be possible to find them, somehow? I should like ask a few important details personally.”

“There is no need for haste, *Ayya*; they tarry in the city yet and come once every day, enquiring after your health. Not today, however; I am yet to see them—”

The younger monk arrived that very moment and made a sign. “I shall return in a moment,” Acharya inclined his head and hurried out. When he returned, it was to see that Prince Arulmozhi Varman’s eagerness, already simmering under a thin veneer of composure, had now heightened; his urgency palpable.

“I cannot linger another moment,” he shifted restlessly upon the bed. “The last thing I want is to be accused of hiding in contravention of the Chakravarthy’s express command; neither do I want this ancient *viharam*’s destruction upon my conscience—”

“Nor do I wish, if you will forgive me, to shoulder the onerous responsibility of caring for your gracious self a moment longer,” Acharya *bikshu* beamed as though privy to something amusing. “I have no desire to keep you against your inclinations; you may leave this very moment—a boat waits in yonder canal.”

“To go where, exactly?”

“The destination is your choice entirely. The two who brought you here have arrived, to escort you.”

The prince, about to leave his bed in one bound, paused. The wizened *bikshu*’s smile was a little too mysterious for his liking; he puzzled over it, wondering if there were fresh plots brewing without his

knowledge. “They’re *both* back, you say?” He ventured cautiously. “And offered no explanation for their return?”

“That, they did. There exists a *Nandhi Mandapam*, your highness, upon the canal banks at roughly a *naazhigai*’s journey from this *viharam*.” The *bikshu*’s gaze settled into the far distance. “I hear that two ladies wait there as we speak, having expressed a desire to meet you.”

The prince hesitated no more, practically scrambling off the bed in his haste. “Take me to the boat at once, Acharya—enough time has been wasted as it is!”

The monk was nothing loath and guided his royal charge carefully, hands around the prince’s shoulders, alert for weakness—a precaution that seemed entirely unnecessary as Ponniyin Selvan strode along the path betraying no sign of having suffered raging fever for more than four days. Sendhan Amudhan and Poonguzhali, waiting anxiously in the boat, brightened considerably at the assured, majestic gait complimented by a right regal, princely bearing.

“Should there arise another opportunity to serve you, *Ayya*, every *bikshu* of Choodamani Viharam would consider it a high honour,” assured Acharya, once Arulmozhi Varman was seated. “In the best interests of your health, I would advise return and a week’s convalescence to ensure complete recovery.”

“I believe such is indicated, Gurudeva—or I wouldn’t be leaving without a word of farewell to the other monks,” was the prince’s swift riposte. The small craft began to bob away; he glanced at Sendhan and Poonguzhali by turns. “I’d thought I was being escorted by celestial beings to *Devalokham* when you brought me here in this boat,” he smiled. “Traitors, both of you—to have dumped me in a monastery full of monks! Be that as it may, it seems I must learn everything that happened ever since I tried to swim and lost consciousness with exhaustion at sea … but before that, let me know who waits at the *Nandhi Mandapam*, will you?”

He may have addressed them both but Poonguzhali said not a word; it was left to Sendhan Amudhan to reveal that his visitors were

Kundhavai Piratti and the Kodumbalur princess, having arrived at Anaimangalam.

“For heaven’s sake,” came Ponniyin Selvan’s exasperated exclamation. “Why must Ilaiya Piratti drag that girl who faints at the slightest provocation everywhere?”

“Tamil women seem to be falling prey to a terrifying new disease of late, *Ayya*,” Sendhan Amudhan offered with a smile. “The slightest sign of infection and they want to renounce sacred Saivism to become Buddhist *bikshunis*!”

“They do, do they? And who has been spouting this sort of nonsense, to your knowledge?”

“The Kodumbalur princess, for one, I hear. This young woman here has been expressing such a wish, as well.”

“Two women won’t be much of a loss to Saivism, Amudha,” the prince chuckled. “I’m well aware of the location of several monasteries entirely devoted to females, in Ilankai; the residence of several pious *bikshunis*, I’m told. Let them say the word, and I shall make arrangements for their renunciation myself!”

The flippant response made Sendhan Amudhan gurgle with merriment after which he collected himself and recited, as far as he was able, everything that had transpired ever since Ponniyin Selvan and Vandhiyathevan came ashore. The prince listened to this account avidly, comparing it with his own recollection of events.

“There—the *Nandhi Mandapam*!” Poonguzhali’s call interrupted the conversation.

Ponniyin Selvan’s attention was riveted at once; his gaze followed the maiden’s outstretched hand in the direction she pointed.

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44
The Bull Grows!

The canal's banks loomed high over the passing boat at that moment —but a little *mandapam* was visible by the quay on one bank in the direction Poonguzhali pointed. Two Nandhi figurines ornamented the edges of the steps where they ended and the *mandapam* began— startlingly beautiful and chiseled with such skill that they were works of art worthy of long, pleasurable observation. It was their presence that bestowed the name *Nandhi Mandapam* upon the structure which was not without exalted connections: *Kaayaarohana Swami* and *Neelaayathaatchi Amman*, supreme deities of the sacred Naagai Kaaronam city were in the habit of patronizing this beautiful *mandapam* each year during the *Vasantha Urchavam*, the Spring Festival where they granted audience to thousands of pious devotees; the crowding throngs would worship devoutly, enjoy the celebrations and a delightful meal in the moonlight before finally dispersing to their homes. This was a rare occurrence, however; the *mandapam*, being some distance from the temple, did not witness a steady influx of visitors on ordinary days.

Closer, closer drifted the boat—but once the prince's gaze settled on the two ladies awaiting him, he had neither eyes nor attention for anyone else.

Ilaiya Piratti Kundhavai Devi descended to the bottom stair as the craft approached the *mandapam*; Vanathi, however, chose to peer from behind a pillar, half-hidden.

The boat docked; the prince was helped out and onto the steps by Sendhan Amudhan within the boat and Kundhavai without, respectively. Once its royal charge had alighted, Poonguzhali and Amudhan rowed away some distance and moored the craft.

"But how thin you've become, *Thambi*." Tears mingled in Kundhavai's tender voice.

“My skeletal frame aside, *Akka*, why do *you* look so pale and drawn?” was Ponniyin Selvan’s quick riposte. “You usually brighten like a lotus at the very sight of me—but your face, lustrous as the moon, is now clouded over; your eyes glisten with tears too … aha, I can guess; your heart must have been wounded by a host of distressing events; you wouldn’t have sent me such an urgent *olai* else—”

“Indeed, *Thambi*. There are a great many pressing matters to discuss, to learn and … but that can wait a moment,” Kundhavai smiled slightly. “Noble prince who rejected the golden throne of Ilankai! Pray condescend to sit upon this one of stone, for the time being.”

Before he obeyed, Ponniyin Selvan bent at his sister’s feet and sought her blessing with every sign of deference; Kundhavai’s gentle fingers caressed his hair as she bestowed her benediction with a kiss on his forehead, tears trembling in her eyes.

“I was wrong to have summoned you today, *Thambi*.”As they seated themselves, Kundhavai’s eyes swept over her brother, observing; assessing; taking note. “The Acharya of Choodamani Viharam sent a message that you’d made a complete recovery—but he was wrong; this fever has ravaged you … and yet, I couldn’t keep from seeing you either; every moment once I’d arrived in Anaimangalam crawled by like a whole *yugam*!”

“My health needn’t concern you at all, *Akka*; had you not sent a boat, I’d have started for Pazhaiyarai myself. Did you know—even in the depths of that terrifying ague, it was your *olai* that caused me anguish … as for your envoy—ah, never have I seen such a warrior as the Vaanar clan’s Vandhiyathevar! I set him a thousand tests but he passed every single one of them—where’s he now, *Akka*?”

For the first time during their conversation, the clouds of depression lifted from Kundhavai’s face, revealing features luminous as the moon. “But why concern yourself with him, *Thambi*?” She smiled slightly, pearly teeth peeping from within lips rich and red as precious coral. “When there are a thousand other matters to discuss—”

“That’s an unexpected reaction,” Ponniyin Selvan’s brows knit together. “He hasn’t incurred your displeasure in any way, has he?”

“What a question! Why must I be annoyed with … he swore to bring you to me and he’s succeeded; there it ends.”

“But the ruses he fashioned; the stratagems his fertile brain wove—the tricks and tactics he conjured out of thin air to accomplish his mission—words fail me when I try to express my astonishment and appreciation. By the way, where *is* he? When I learnt of your presence here, I’d assumed he’d accompanied you—instead, I find this royal maiden who faints at the slightest excuse.”

“Ah, but you’d be stunned at her transformation into a courageous woman! Listen: yesterday, the Mudhanmandhiri’s elephant twined its trunk around her and flung her—only into my lap of course, but there was no way she could have known that, and if you could’ve only seen the way she kept her wits without sinking into blind panic—”

“Oh, enough, *enough* about your precious friend—more about mine, if you please.”

“What more? His mission complete, he’s returned to his master Aditha Karikalan.”

“He’s broken his word in that case, for he promised—he *swore* to forswear Kanchi and stay in Chozha Nadu for good, didn’t he?”

“To what purpose, pray? Why dilly-dally here when the fate of even Chozha citizens hangs in the balance? But if your esteem for him is such, there should be no problem in seeking an audience with the Chakravarthy and obtaining his ancestors’ *rajyam* of old as a reward for his stellar services.”

“And what would such an epitome of valour and courage do with a fiefdom, *Akka*?”

“What every other lord of the realm does, I imagine. *You* may have abjured a throne, but surely you cannot expect everyone to do the same?”

This sally prompted a slight, rueful smile from the prince. “I did what I did in the presence of witnesses, and yet Father has ordered my arrest

upon a completely baseless allegation—”

“A warrant that wouldn’t have been issued had you *accepted* the throne of Ilankai, *Thambi*—for you’d have become an independent ruler above and beyond Chozha laws; who could’ve dared arrest you then?”

“Should I really have acted in direct contravention of Father’s wishes?”

“The truth, Ponniyin Selva, is that he would’ve been delighted had you been crowned king of Ilankai—for that would have ended his anxiety about Chozha *samrajyam’*s future; the rest of the kingdom would’ve been apportioned between our elder brother and Madhuranthakan, finally affording him some measure of peace … in fact, negotiations have already begun towards precisely such an eventuality: division of the Chozha *rajyam* into regions north and south of River Kollidam. Father cherished hopes that you’d be of some assistance in this matter, but your disregard of previous summons made him decide upon arrest. He’s well aware that you’ve refused the throne of Ilankai.”

“Never—! Not for a moment shall I countenance splitting the kingdom; nor shall I be a party to this travesty. Rather the entire *rajyam* be handed over to *Chithappa* Madhuranthakar, lock, stock and barrel.”

“You and the Mudhanmandhiri are of the same mind, then.”

“Indeed; after all, that was the motivation behind his Ilankai visit … *Akka*, shall I reveal my real reason for refusing the throne?”

“There isn’t anyone else to whom you can open your heart, is there?”

“True enough; I’ve no one to share my secrets with … well. I had high hopes of Ilankai before I journeyed there, *Akka*; the castles in the air I’d built about its dimensions—! Fat chance of divining its endless landscape for I realized just how tiny it was when I actually arrived: a day’s ride on a horse or elephant and you’d have traversed it whole, from its west coast to the east.”

“Surely Chozha Nadu is no bigger, *Thambi*. A day on horseback and its dimensions may be conquered with much the same ease.”

“Right, once again—which is why I shall reject *this* kingdom as well, if it were ever offered me. And to divide such a small area further into Chozha, Pandiya and Chera dominions! I can’t help but blame the much-vaunted experts who subjected our country to such divisions—this is exactly why our kingdom has never attained its true potential despite boasting a horde of warriors among warriors. Witness Chandra Gupta, Asoka and Samudhra Gupta in the north! As for Vikramaditya, Harshavardhana and the rest—words fail me at the dimensions of the empires these kings of kings, these Maha Chakravarthis ruled in their lifetimes—but what of Tamil Nadu? Can you recall an emperor who brought the whole of this land under his sway—yes, I do remember Mahendra Chakravarthy and his son Maamallar, but their famed Pallava dynasty dwindled to nothing after their reigns … if I should ever rule, *Akka*—ah, not for me these miniscule kingdoms; these petty *rajyams* the size of fiefdoms; mine shall be a massive territory ranging from Ilankai at the very tip to the vast Gangetic plains of the north; I shall ascend the magnificent lion throne of a Maha Chozha *samrajyam* where the tiger flag flutters in lands as far-flung as the Maldives, to the isles of Saavakam—! You think me a lunatic, don’t you?”

“Not for a moment, Arul Varma—I’m delighted that there’s someone aside from my own insane self to dream of magnificent castles in the air and a dazzling, illustrious Chozha future. If you’re a lunatic, surely my insanity far exceeds yours—but I do know that Father’s grandfather Paranthaka Chakravarthy cherished these very ambitions; he, however, had not the fortune of seeing his *manorajyams* fulfilled during his time—but I believe I shall, during mine. Death shan’t claim me before I’ve had a chance to see the Chozha *samrajyam* extend all the way from Ilankai to the Ganga; through the length and breadth of the Maldives and Saavakam … I’d hoped, once, to see these gargantuan desires come true by Aditha Karikalan—but not anymore. My elder brother is a warrior amongst warriors, but of self-control he possesses little and therefore of achievements, there will be none. But you … I still nurture the hope—a tiny one, but it exists—that through you I shall see my ambitions become reality. And yet, I’m pragmatic enough to admit that this too might come to nothing, in which case I have another plan: if you won’t be the instrument of my aspirations then your son will. I shall raise your flesh

and blood from the very moment of his birth; I shall fashion him into a magnificent warrior the likes of which this world has never seen; I shall mould him into a conqueror, a very lion amongst men with the courage to resist petty pleasures, capable of bending heaven and earth to his will—"

"You're certainly a bigger fool than I am, *Akka*. I haven't the faintest intention of marriage and you're already dreaming about my son … I'd better warn you: should one of those precious young ladies you've been mollycoddling in your *anthappuram* fancy themselves queens, fantasizing about wedding me and ascending the Chozha throne—tell them from me that their outrageous ambitions shall come to nothing!" Ponniyin Selvan's eyes flickered for just a moment in the direction of Vanathi, still half-concealed behind the pillar; the next instant he had turned, his gaze alighting upon one of the Nandhi figurines alongside the quay.

"There's something I'd like to tell you, though," he continued. "Ilankai might be a tiny kingdom but its rulers were the embodiment of glory; *mahapurushars*—illustrious men with hearts as large as their fame. Great ambitions, and greater accomplishments—they managed to construct with puny bricks, mountains of Buddhist *sthupams* piercing the very heavens; Buddhist *viharam*s boasting a thousand, two thousand chambers; *mandapams* possessing no less than ten thousand columns … Buddha Bhagavan's stature had to be readily apparent and so they established statues high as those coconut trees over there—*Akka*! Pray turn your gaze towards the Nandhi in front of us—how tiny; what a miniscule sculpture! Surely this cannot be the magnificent mount of Mahadevar, God of Gods whose head and feet are beyond all divining? Remember that our lord Paramasivan's entourage consists of terrifying demon *Boodhaganangal*—and Nandhi Devar is, after all, the supreme guardian; the sentry at the gates of Kailasam, Siva Peruman's sacred abode, charged with keeping out these alarming creatures—but how can he, if he's so stunted? *Akka*—look—look over there! I see the Nandhi growing—growing—ah, he grows again—again—more and more—now he's gigantic, nudging the roof of this very *mandapam*—the roof's vanished but Nandhi's growth shows no sign of stopping—he's of magnificent proportions now for he's tall as the sky … ah, here tiptoe the *Boodhaganangal*; they tremble at the very sight of Nandhi and bend at the waist, begging an audience with Siva Peruman and—what reverence; what respectful devotion! And if Nandhi Bhagavan, Guardian

to the gates of the heavenly abode is of such mammoth dimensions, how much more magnificent should be the temple of Siva Peruman? Shouldn't the *gopuram* be of such a humongous height that it's praised as *Dakshina Meru*—Mount Meru of the South? And the *prahaarams*, the corridors ought to be massive as well, surely? The tiny temples of Chozha Nadu today are fit to be nothing more than the abode of the dwarf—like Agasthya Muni—not Sivan … I've made up my mind: kingship is not for me, neither is the botheration of ruling—I shall make a humble petition to whoever ascends the throne: appoint me the Temple Renovation Official and I shall rest content—"

"At this rate, you and I shall have to compete for the title of Greatest Living Fool. Grave peril surrounds Chozha Nadu this very moment, *Thambi*—the work of enemies without, and within; by outright foes—and by foes who call themselves friends. I've had a horrifying nightmare for a while now: a dazzling sword flashes like lightning in my mind's eye; it's about to plunge into someone's heart—but whose, I cannot determine. Is the victim to be a member of the Chozha clan—or is it this *rajyam* itself, about to be cleaved in two and thus ruined?" Kundhavai sighed. "I don't know—I cannot know … but I do realize that you and I shall have to join hands and find a way to save this kingdom, somehow."

"So do I, judging from the details divulged by Vallavarayar …" the prince paused. "As for the danger that threatens our dynasty—you know the likely perpetrator, I assume."

"You're referring to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani aren't you?"

"Indeed. And—her identity?"

"I'm aware of that as well, from Vandhiyathevar's report—which explains my haste to meet you right away," explained Kundhavai.

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45
Vanathi in Danger

Do you remember my tumbling into the Kaveri when I was five, *Akka*?" Arulmozhi asked, out of the blue. "And Mother Ponni herself coming to my rescue, setting me into the boat—then vanishing without a trace?"

"What a question, *Thambi*—as if I could ever forget!" Kundhavai returned with alacrity. "You were named *Ponniyin Selvan* upon that very event, after all."

"I saw her in Ilankai, *Akka*—the divine lady who'd saved me … you're struck dumb. Surprised?"

"Not that, no—but I must admit to extreme curiosity. Tell me all, if you please."

"I do please—not that that's a story for one sitting or even a day. I shall give you the broad outlines, though: she's rescued me from more than just a watery grave in the Kaveri. I've lost count of the times I've been delivered from danger in Eezham, but it's not just that she's saved my life—there are people who do that often, even involuntarily—it's her love that practically moves me to tears … a love that has no equal in all the fourteen worlds!" The look Arulmozhi cast upon his sister was sardonic. "Much as I hate to say this, even *your* affection must take second place to that lady's devotion."

"You needn't hesitate to say that at all," Kundhavai remarked with a wry smile. "My love for you is hardly altruistic; it's rooted in a core of selfishness … if you must know the truth, *Thambi*, it's Chozha *samrajyam* that matters foremost; my kingdom's welfare is closest to my heart, and my love for you is founded on my belief that you might help it ascend to its rightful, glorious place in the pantheon of empires … but if it ever occurred to me that you'd prove a barrier to that ambition, love could change to loathing in a moment. That deaf, mute lady is different,

though: she's made you the object of her affection—an affection that was denied its true recipient: our father, whom she's worshipped for more than twenty years. Her overflowing emotions required an outlet … and as you say, such intense love has no equal, indeed."

"How did you know, *Akka*?"

"Know what, *Thambi*?"

"That she's our stepmother?"

"Father's account, and a few facts culled from Vandhiyathevar but stay: does she think you her son—or is she aware that you were born to another?"

"Neither she nor I have allowed such sentiments to poison our thoughts—so why must you?"

"Our mother occupies a throne that is hers by rights, *Thambi*; her unconditional love under such circumstances is unusual indeed, wouldn't you say?"

"She must know I'm not hers—there's such a thing as age, you know; she's not unaware, I imagine, of that factor. She's deprived of speech and therefore cannot express herself the way we do—but she's managed to draw her life story and I learnt what I could from her pictures. Leave alone her feelings about me; when I think of her love and passion for Father, I'm overwhelmed with emotion, I tell you … d'you think he looked like me, *Akka*? In his youth?"

"I hate to disillusion you, *Thambi*—but no, he surpassed you," Kundhavai smiled. "Father was the very epitome of good looks, rivaling even Manmadhan, the God of Love, when he was young. And our clan, although famed for martial prowess had hardly won honours for handsome features—until grandfather Arinjaya Thevar wed the Vaithumbaraayar princess Kalyani, famed far and wide for her exquisite beauty. A *bhuvanamohini*, you know, with a face as lustrous as the radiant full moon and a clear, unblemished complexion that glowed like burnished gold … something you shouldn't find hard to believe, considering how lovely she is at this advanced age—which explains

Father's charming countenance: he was nicknamed Sundara Chozhar, after all. We've taken after our mother, however; the Malayamans of Thirukkovilur have always prided themselves on valour; they despise beauty and aspire to a warrior's glory—in fact, they believe that handsome features are an enemy to courage—"

"I know nothing of the bond between beauty and battle prowess, but I do know for a fact that there's no connection between love and loveliness, else why—"

"Else why does Vanathi stare at you unblinking, half-hidden by that pillar over there? Or Sendhan Amudhan at Poonguzhali in that boat yonder, in a state of perfect bliss?"

"Talk about binding a knee to a balding head," the prince smiled ruefully. "Here I am, speaking of my stepmother's love for me and you've gone on a tangent. Be that as it may—is it possible for one person to perfectly resemble another, *Akka*?"

"Twins certainly can, sometimes; there are daughters who are mirror images of mothers in their youth. Then you have people—in rare cases, I grant you—who bear absolutely no relation to each other, yet seem like they should."

"Could it be true what Vandhiyathevar said—about our stepmother in Ilankai and the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani resembling each other? I've seen Nandhini as a girl of course, but not after her marriage—or not well enough to compare, at any rate. What's your opinion?"

"Unlike you, I've seen the Pazhuvoor Rani at close quarters but not our stepmother—still, Vandhiyathevar must have been right, considering my father's own account."

"He divulged everything to you, did he? Of his own volition? What did he say? And when?"

"Vanathi and I were in Thanjai a few days ago; he took the opportunity to share something that happened in his youth, then. He'd been marooned on an island in Ilankai's vicinity, was helped and then loved by a mute girl—when Paranthakar's men discovered his presence

upon the island and arrived to retrieve him. Apparently he glimpsed the girl amidst the crowds thronging the palace gates on the day of his coronation as crown prince—but she vanished the next instant. He sent the Mudhanmandhiri himself after her, but Aniruddhar returned with the news that she'd flung herself off the lighthouse into the sea and drowned. Arulmozhi, it was then that I discovered just how this incident had scarred our father's heart—the terrible anguish he'd suffered every day and night of the last twenty-four years—for he still believes her dead; that his brutality broke her heart and took her life… let's set aside our glorious castles in the air about Chozha Nadu's future magnificence *Thambi*, for you and I have a far greater duty, now: you ought to strain every nerve to bring that *maatharasi* from Ilankai to Thanjai, somehow, and prove that she's still alive—or there can be no peace for Father either in this birth or the next!"

"I've been to the very gates of heaven twice or thrice lately, *Akka*—but do you know the thought that tortured me the most during those hellish hours? That I was forced to leave this world without escorting our stepmother into Father's presence … ah, my heart twists whenever I think of that gracious lady's sufferings! The ability to speak can provide succor by allowing us to share our heartache; to be able to listen could afford us the solace of others—but think, for a moment, of a woman who can do neither! She has no choice, has she, but to stifle every spurt of love, eagerness, sorrow, distress, anger and resentment? She can do nothing except to suppress every emotion—and how much more horrifying when it's someone like *Periyamma* whose love has been extinguished so cruelly—who's suffered such crushing disillusionment! Hardly surprising, is it, that she's taken to roaming the wilds of Ilankai like a madwoman? By God, my heart feels like it might explode at the injustice done to her and I wish with every pore of my being to take her to Father … but I must know: would he truly welcome her?"

"Regardless, it would be our bounden duty to bring them together, *Thambi* … if you'd only heard his anguished screams at night, petrified that her ghost had come to haunt him—! Such mental agony is certainly one reason for his physical ailments; he hasn't recovered his health at all."

"And you know that for a fact, do you? How, *Akka*? Did Father confide this as well?"

“He did—and so did Vanathi.”

“She—? What’s *her* connection to all this, pray? You didn’t reveal anything, did you?”

“For heaven’s sake—no, not at all. Just a moment; she shall tell you what transpired in Thanjai … you know, your execrable manners are hardly a credit to Chozha decorum, *Thambi*. You haven’t spoken two words together to the Kodumbalur princess—not even enquired after her wellbeing! So much for revering the beloved daughter of Eezham’s martyr! You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Surely Vanathi’s concerns are your exclusive domain, *Akka*?” The prince’s voice was decidedly small. “Why must I interfere—or, well … ask after her?”

“Wonderfully put; quiet, now,” Kundhavai admonished him. “Vanathi—come, my girl; the prince would like to see you. Properly, I might add.”

The Kodumbalur princess took a dainty step forward; her limpid gaze swept over the prince without seeming to see him. “You’re making things up, *Akka*.” Thus, in tones soft as the smoothest silk. “Your brother hasn’t the slightest desire to see me.” Vanathi’s eyes flicked from the *mandapam* to the canal. “All his attention is riveted to the boat over there—perhaps he’s in some haste to leave?” She may well have wished to implicate Poonguzhali in her mention of a boat.

Arulmozhi was betrayed into a laugh.“She certainly has a way with words, hasn’t she?” He remarked, good-humouredly. “For a moment, I was worried that here was another mute tacked to our family’s dumb women!”

“I find myself tongue-tied in his presence, *Akka*,” Vanathi retorted, with no sign of said affliction. “I’m so frightened that I worry I’ve turned mute!”

“That’s no bad thing, I assure you. There’s a man in Kodikkarai—Poonguzhali’s elder brother: he manages to stutter a word or two in company, but a moment in his wife’s presence and he’s struck dumb! His

family have more or less given up on him and consigned him to a speechless existence."

"A wretched state that haunts this maiden as well. There was a time, you know, when I couldn't stop the words tumbling from her lips—she'd babble endlessly like a brook. But that changed—in fact, once you left for Ilankai, as I remember. Speech is a rarity with her now; she much prefers retiring to secluded corners, lost in her own world … be that as it may, do tell Arulmozhi all you know of what happened in the Thanjai palace that night, Vanathi," instructed Kundhavai. "In detail, please."

"Her highness may as well seat herself when she does, *Akka*—imagine her *periya thanthai*'s anguish if he ever knew of all this torturous standing about," The prince's eyes glinted. "I've lost count of the times the Chief of the Southern Chozha Forces enquired about this young lady—but what with your complete silence about her affairs, I was often hard put to answer him, reduced to inane stammers—"

"Surely the Vaanar warrior delivered my messages regarding her, for I made sure to tell him in some detail—"

"He would've, *Akka*, but his highness probably never heard a word," Vanathi interjected. "There's so much to engage his attention, you see."

"Accurate enough; my mind refused to consider anything else once I'd seen your *olai*, not to mention that I've grown rather deaf since this ague—tell your friend to speak up, won't you?"

Vanathi proceeded to retail her experiences on the evening Kundhavai left for the Durgai shrine; her solitary meanderings along the lonely corridors of the sprawling Thanjai palace; her alarm at the Chakravarthy's panicked screams; the way she had tiptoed to the upper balcony and peered down—and the scene that had unfolded beneath her horrified gaze. There were moments during the narration when she raised her eyes to the prince's face—and promptly lost herself in those mesmerizing features; voice trailing away … during which times it was left to Ilaiya Piratti to gently prompt her, a knowing smile on her lips.

When the recital finally drew to an end, the prince, who had been listening avidly, turned to his sister. "Interesting—but your beloved

companion has left out something important, hasn't she? Having seen and heard such stirring events, the next item on her agenda must have been a spectacular fainting fit."

Kundhavai chuckled while Vanathi hung her head, overcome with bashfulness.

"Why don't you explore these banks for a while, my dear?" Ilaiya Piratti's voice was warm with affection and approbation. "Or you could wait a while with our entourage. Arul Varman is bound to stay here a few more days; there shall be more than enough opportunities to meet."

"I'll walk along these banks by all means, *Akka*!" And Vanathi practically bounded down the steps, buoyed by a sudden spurt of enthusiasm that seemed inexplicable, to say the least.

Arulmozhi watched, unblinking, as she sprinted down the stairs, eyes bright and face radiant with happiness, until her form vanished—and finally turned to his sister. "It isn't difficult to divine the reason for Father's lament … but what could be the rationale behind the scene he clearly saw? Was it a hallucination—but if so, surely your friend couldn't have shared it?"

"Not a delusion; neither did Vanathi witness a mirage. Here's what really occurred that night in Father's bedchambers: a cunningly structured play; a most superior theatrical routine—the lead for which was none other than the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani. I suspected this the moment I heard what had happened; a suspicion that was confirmed by information proffered by both Vandhiyathevan and yourself—"

"But what would be the purpose of such an elaborate production? As for the Ilaiya Rani enacting a part—I confess I don't understand her reasons."

"I do—especially as I'm aware that Nandhini harbours doubts about her birth. There's some mystery there; she knows that the Chakravarthy lost consciousness the first time he set eyes on her. She's never appeared in his presence since, you know. Clearly, this performance was meant to unearth hitherto unknown facts …"

"*Were* any unearthed?"

"I've no way of knowing—I doubt if Brahmmadevan, the very Creator could plumb the depths of Nandhini's soul. And when I think of that ancient battle-axe Pazhuvettarayar's fate at her devious hands my heart bleeds, I declare. We spoke of exquisite beauty just now, didn't we, *Thambi*? Well, I admit here and now that there's only woman who can truly lay claim to it: Nandhini. None of us are her equal; we're all as dust at her feet when it comes to sheer loveliness. Every man who crosses her path turns her slave in moments: Pazhuvettarayar; Madhuranthakar; Thirumalaiyappan; Kandamaaran and even, as of now, Parthibendran! There's a reason why the Mudhanmandhiri never entertains even the idea of an audience with her—Aniruddhar's frankly terrified of her charms; Aditha Karikalan doesn't set foot in Thanjai for much the same reason. There's only one man—one man, in a whole legion of courageous men—who escaped her snares; slipped her treacherous net of beauty and made a triumphant exit, unscathed, unafraid and undefeated by her devious schemes—"

"The Vaanar warrior, I understand?"

"Indeed—for which reason I've dispatched him to Aditha Karikalan in Kanchi."

"Have you?" The prince paused. "Why?"

"The Pazhuvoor Queen has sent our brother an *olai* to meet her at Sambuvaraiyar's palace in Kadambur—and I intend to do everything I can to prevent it or if, at worst, such a meeting does happen, to ensure that the consequences aren't fatal. Karikalan has no idea that she's his elder sister—and I'm not sure Nandhini is aware of it, either."

"You know that for a fact, do you? That she's our sister?"

"Surely there can be no doubt about it? I've changed my sentiments ever since I realized this remarkable truth, *Thambi*." Kundhavai paused, clearly uncomfortable. "My behaviour towards her when we were children is hardly a credit to myself, I admit: I detested her; loathed her very presence. Her extraordinary beauty provoked such jealousy that I couldn't suffer you or Karikalan to even speak to her. I'm ashamed when

I remember how painstakingly I nurtured my resentment and envy long after she'd left for Pandiya Nadu … and I've lost count of the times I scorned her once she returned, the wife of old Pazhuvettarayar. All that's at an end; now—now, I'm determined upon redemption; to atone for my sins—"

"In what way, *Akka*?"

"The next time we meet, I shall fall at her feet and beg to forgive all my wrongs against her. And accept whatever punishment she awards—"

"I've no intention of allowing any such thing, for you've committed no crime that requires atonement. Neither shall I suffer to see you at anyone's feet—I say, here and now, that there's no one worthy of punishing you in all fourteen worlds of this universe. Any jealousy between you was not your fault but hers; she loathed you, heart and soul; hated and despised you—"

"Didn't you mention just now that your heart twisted at our stepmother's sufferings, roaming like a lunatic in Ilankai? Well, my sentiments towards Nandhini are similar—ah, to think of the horrific experiences she underwent when she could've led a luxurious life in one royal palace after another, the petted daughter of an emperor! Someone's crime in the distant past condemned my elder sister to the wretched fate of marriage with that *kizhavar* Pazhuvettarayar …"

"I suppose you couldn't guess how it all came about, *Akka*? Why does Father persist in believing *Periyamma* to be dead? And why must Nandhini be condemned, as you say, to a wretched existence in unknown places, an orphan at the mercy of random people—?"

"I've tortured myself with these questions day and night—but so far, truth has largely eluded me. There are, however, two people known to us who might possess answers: I'm certain that Grandmother Sembian Maadevi knows something; Mudhanmandhiri Aniruddhar knows everything … but we'll unearth nothing from either of them. As for Azhwarkkadiyaan, he's a disciple cut from the same cloth as his Guru; not a word will he breathe, no matter what he knows. Besides, there's no time to indulge in investigations, *Thambi*—what matters now is that we prevent Nandhini from doing something that will bring our clan nothing

but the greatest dishonour and land us in unimaginable peril. Vandhiyathevar described his meeting with Nandhini: *She maintains and worships a fearsome sword, dazzling like lightning and inscribed with the emblem of a fish*! Ever since, my heart has been thudding with anxiety, terrified that she might endanger us without even being aware that she's a member of the very dynasty she seeks to ruin—"

"What about revealing everything to the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani? Wouldn't that help?"

"I'm not sure it would. Her fury might grow a thousand-fold … not that that releases us from our duty; we shall have to do what we must."

"And Vandhiyathevar is an excellent choice, I admit—but what about Father's consent? Surely there's no reason he must suffer mental as well as physical agony? We can start for Thanjai right away, can't we?"

"No, not at all. I'm going there in a couple of days but you, I'm afraid, must resign yourself to a prolonged stay here."

"You don't really wish me to lie concealed in direct contravention of Father's commands, do you?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking you to do. Your appearance in the capital at this point will result in a bloody riot: our people have worked themselves into a fury against Madhuranthakar and the Pazhuvoor lords as it is—they're even resentful of the Chakravarthy for having issued orders to imprison you … all that remains for an outright rebellion is your entrance upon the scene; the cauldron of their boiling emotions is bound to overflow, scalding everyone and everything. The *rajyam* may well demand your coronation at once; the chances of men descending in a siege upon the fort and palace cannot be understated—and I need hardly remind you of Father's distress under the circumstances. I know I sent you an *olai* bidding you here as the kingdom was in turmoil … but now I find myself wondering if it wouldn't be better if you returned to Ilankai, after all—"

"Impossible; I've no intention of beating a tame retreat without even an audience with Father—but if it's your wish that I come to Thanjai

incognito, I've no objection. I must and shall visit the Chakravarthy, though, and reveal the truth about Kaveri Amman's identity."

"A task I shall undertake personally, which begs the question: is your presence really necessary?"

"Of course—to add the weight of conviction. Father would be more likely to believe the evidence of my own eyes, and achieve some measure of peace. Besides, it should be easy to gain permission to bring *Periyamma* to him—"

"I've no desire to play spoilsport with your schemes but stay a week more in Choodamani Viharam, I beg you. I shall depart for Thanjai first and impart news of your presence in Chozha Nadu, but …" Kundhavai paused, choosing her words carefully. "Meeting you was not my only reason to journey all the way here, Arul Varma—I seek a boon. Pray grant my request and I shall never ask anything else of you; nor bid you lie concealed, I swear." She stared into the distance. "Men are required, by virtue of their character and station in life, to step voluntarily into all sorts of peril; there's no denying that. To see you achieve honours once won by our ancestors—to see you distinguishing yourself in the battle of life is my greatest desire; you must and shall gain a peerless reputation when it comes to courage and sheer valour; there's no denying that either. And yet … before you subject yourself to further danger, *Thambi*, grant me this sole request …"

"This elaborate preamble, *Akka*," the prince raised an eyebrow. "When have I ever refused you?"

"Which is what prompts me to engage upon this quest. Aditha Karikalan hasn't shown any interest in entering the state of matrimony so far; I don't believe he ever will." Kundhavai bit her lips. "Sundara Chozhar's lineage looks to you for its survival, and successors, Arul Varma. You'll accede to my wishes in this regard, won't you?"

There was a pregnant pause.

"Assuming I do," the prince answered, finally. "You'll consent to my choosing a bride, won't you?"

“What a question! If our thoughts and choices have never differed in twenty years, why would they now? Why ask my consent specifically?”

“I have my reasons, *Akka*. The woman I wed must prove a perfect mate; should cooperate in every way to accomplish my daydreams, shouldn’t she?”

“*Thambi*,” Kundhavai smiled slightly. “Surely you don’t wish to achieve your ambitions with the help of a woman?”

“*Ayyo*!” Screams rose from a distance at that precise moment. “*Ayyo—Akka*! *Akka*!”

It was Vanathi’s voice.

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Hidden Meanings and Explanations

Aasaabangam:

The word Kalki uses to describe the mute lady’s mental distress is this, which literally means “quelling of desire.”

Maatharasi

A beautiful Tamil word that translates to “Queen among Women.”

46
The Princess Laughs

Even as the prince and Kundhavai Devi lost themselves in conversation ... And Vanathi lost herself watching them, half-hidden behind a pillar ... The following exchange occurred between Poonguzhali and Sendhan, waiting in the boat upon the canal.

“I’m going to ask you something, Amudha,” she opened the conversational gambit. “You’ll answer me truthfully, won’t you?”

“My tongue has never uttered a falsehood, Poonguzhali—which is why I’ve taken care to keep away from everyone the last four days, so I don’t have to talk.”

“But some can’t open their mouth without spewing a torrent of lies … the one who took an *olai* to the prince was one such. You know, Vandhiyathevan.”

“And yet, a good man; whatever the reason, his lies have never harmed anyone.”

“He did mention something about you—and I’d like to verify the truth or otherwise of his statement.”

“There’s no reason for him to spin tales about me … still, what did he say?”

“That you’d praised me to the skies.”

“True enough.”

“He said you loved me—and wished to marry me.”

“Really? He actually told you this?”

“Of course, Amudha.”

“He deserves my undying gratitude.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t have opened my heart to you on my own—I wouldn’t have dared. But he turned envoy and revealed my sentiments, didn’t he? I’m deeply grateful.”

“Does that mean that he was right?”

“There’s no doubt about it.”

“But … why?” Poonguzhali knit her brows. “Why did you fall in love with me?”

“Must there even be a reason?”

“Bend your thoughts, won’t you? Surely there ought to have been some motivation?”

“No one in this world has ever been able to understand the whys and wherefores of love, Poonguzhali.”

“Don’t people fall for each other based on looks?”

“Fall, yes. Grow infatuated as well—not that that’s true love by any stretch of imagination; neither does it pass the test of time. You mentioned Vandhiyathevan a moment ago—he became my friend within moments of meeting me for the very first time and I — I was willing to lay down my life for him! You don’t really think he extended friendship because he was madly attracted to my striking features?”

“But your devoted friend praised mine to the skies, didn’t he?”

“Admired your loveliness, certainly—but stopped short of falling in love with you. For that matter, he waxed eloquent about the Pazhuvoor Rani’s exquisite beauty as well, but did he surrender to her charms? Quite to the contrary, in fact.”

“And I know why.”

“Do you? What’s the reason?”

“He’s lost his heart to Ilaiya Piratti over there, deep in conversation with the prince.”

“Well, there’s your explanation: clearly, love and loveliness don’t go hand in hand.”

“Good heavens—you don’t think I’m prettier than the princess, do you?”

“Can there possibly be any doubt on that score? Your exquisite beauty eclipses that of not just Ilaiya Piratti but the Kodumbalur maiden behind that pillar; your loveliness would put the Pazhuvoor Ilaiya Rani’s charms—a woman extolled as Mohini’s ravishing incarnate—to shame … a divine allure that’s turned my greatest enemy, I might add, for I daren’t reveal the storm of love that torments my heart. I’m terrified, you see—there’s no way a stunning beauty worthy of celestial Devas and earthly Chakravarthis; an object of affection to beings of heaven and earth could ever desire poor, pitiful me …”

Poonguzhali stared into the distance, lost in reverie. “And if I should refuse your love, Amudha?” she asked, finally. “What would you do?”

“Possess myself in patience, for a while. Wait to see if you’ll experience a change of heart.”

“How could that possibly happen?”

“Humans are strange creatures; we can’t plumb the depths of our own minds, sometimes. Our heart of hearts remains shrouded from our gaze due to superfluous reasons … but once the smokescreen evaporates; once the mirage vanishes—the truth is revealed; we realize what lies beneath.”

“Fair enough; you’ll wait. And if I’m still unwilling?”

“Try to stifle my heart’s cry; to quell my love, somehow.”

“Could you possibly?”

“Nothing’s impossible with effort—a supreme effort to submit myself to God’s will, to His sacred service. It was piety that answered the call of saints after all, when they sought to control unruly faculties—”

“It doesn’t seem to me that your love can be true, Amudha.”

“What—*why*? What’s your definition of heartfelt love, then?”

“If you’d set your heart on me to the exclusion of everyone else, my refusal should make you want to murder me; if you suspected me of encouraging the advances of someone else, you’d want to rip out his throat as well—”

“The love I cherish is *sathvic,* Poonguzhali, of a divine nature … but you describe the emotion of demons—even ghouls, I should say; *paisaasam*—”

“I know neither divine nor demonic natures; only human. Love ought to bring happiness, Amudha, to my pathetic, puny intelligence … but how does one patiently accept sorrow? Why must we suffer in silence if the object of our affections betrays us by choosing another? Why wait—why hope in vain for a change in sentiment? Surely revenge is the best option? Surely that’s normal—that’s human nature?”

“Far from it, Poonguzhali. Vengeance is the domain of demons, of devious creatures that know no better. True love fosters nobility; the happiness of the one we love ought to be ours … and their rejection, though painful for a while, ought to be repaid with goodwill—goodwill that shall rebound tenfold as bliss—”

“An instinct that’s neither in human nature nor within the scope of humans. The son of a physician accompanied Vandhiyathevan, you know, and fell in love with me—but the moment he realized that it could go nowhere, he promptly tried to betray Vandhiyathevan to the Pazhuvettarayars under the mistaken impression that *he* was the reason for his loss—and I’ve no doubt he’d have strangled me, as well.”

“Hardly human then; a member of the *asura* clan.”

“Over there,” Poonguzhali glanced in the direction of the *mandapam*. “Look, the wilting Kodumbalur princess who’s lost her heart to Ponniyin Selvar … I wonder what she’d do if he jilted her? Try to poison him, I’m sure. And murder whomever she suspects of having stolen his heart.”

“Not for a moment shall I entertain the idea of Vanathi descending to such depths. A woman who’s the very embodiment of divine *saathveekam* wouldn’t.”

“Perhaps. But I know that *I* would.”

“I shall pray that God forgives your trespasses …”

“Why on earth—! God to forgive me … it ought to be the other way around!”

“And He shall forgive your unthinking blasphemy as well.”

“You’re a good man, Amudha—you’ve taken after my aunt; *Periyathai* …”

“Well, this is new. What’s it all about?”

“Our family’s always insisted that she’s dead, haven’t they?”

“You’re speaking of the sister older to my mother and your father, aren’t you?”

“Yes—and she’s far from dead.”

“Some such news fell upon my ears as well.”

“She roams the jungles of Ilankai even today, like a madwoman.”

“The recipient of our family heirloom—the curse of generations.”

“That’s not the only reason for her lunatic meanderings; there’s another: the terrible betrayal of a member of the Chozha clan.”

“What—*what* did you say?”

“My aunt spent her youth in an island near Ilankai; a Chozha prince made a great show of having fallen in love with her, and she believed his lies. Later, the prince was crowned heir to the throne and promptly rejected her—”

“How did you get to know all this, Poonguzhali?”

“From *Periyathai*—through sign language, of course. And let me tell you something else: a handful of Pandiya sympathizers arrived a few days ago, and asked my help for their cause: wreaking vengeance on the dynasty that betrayed my aunt. I was burning with outrage, having just learnt her sorrow and I’d almost decided to throw in my lot with them … until I realized that the one who’d suffered the most at Chozha hands cherished the most loyalty to them. Not only had she forgiven the one who’d betrayed her, but also saved, countless times, his own son, born to another. That was when I abandoned my intention to join the Pandiyas … and just as you mentioned, her love is gentle and sacred indeed—but I’m not my aunt; I shan’t do what she did.”

“What else, then?”

“Wreak my vengeance; savour a marvelous, delicious revenge. Should any prince turn traitor and break my heart, I shall murder him; I shall strangle the woman who stole him from me—and lastly, I shall plunge my dagger into my heart and kill myself!”

“Good God—such terrible oaths —!”

“You’re preaching composure because you’ve no idea of the storm that’s been raging in my heart for the past two years …”

“A torment worse than your aunt’s?”

“Her situation is a far cry from mine, Amudha.”

“Your—wait, what? *Your* situation, you say? Pray, pray think before you … is this true indeed, Poonguzhali?”

“Of course.” Poonguzhali turned to him. “If you were to compare blood drawn from both me and Vanathi … would you find a difference, Amudha?”

“Not at all.”

“Is she better than me? In intelligence, beauty, skill—or anything else?”

“Never. You’re a daughter of the oceans while she’s had a staid upbringing in dull palaces; you could kill a dangerous jungle predator with a single swipe of your hand—row a boat in choppy seas amidst crashing waves—save exhausted castaways about to drown … but Vanathi? She’s likely to shriek at the sight of a gentle, foam-flecked wave—scream with terror at the sight of a house cat—faint at the very mention of bad news!”

“And this is the woman Ilaiya Piratti chooses to favour, while ignoring my very presence? This is the maiden raised to the heavens while I’m trampled to dust?”

“You misconstrue her intentions, Poonguzhali. Vanathi has been her dearest companion for ages, while you’ve entered her circle of acquaintance only lately and besides … hasn’t she been extremely grateful for saving the prince and conveying him here?”

“Ah, who cares for the thanks of that pedigreed princess in her high and mighty palace? She’s welcome to her precious gratitude.” Poonguzhali turned a mulish countenance to him. “If the prince has to be returned to the *viharam*, Amudha, you’d better go alone; I’d overturn the boat on purpose—”

“You’d never do such a thing. What crime has the prince committed to deserve such a punishment?”

“I’ve run mad, Amudha; my wits are disordered. I’m not in full possession of my senses … just thinking of his father’s betrayal might make me do something dreadful—so you’d better row him back.”

“If that’s what you wish … and what about you?”

“I shall follow that dainty Kodumbalur princess, and throw a rock on her head!”And Poonguzhali picked a smooth pebble from the ground.

A *raja rishabam* emerged from a dense coconut grove upon the banks just then; a magnificent specimen of a bull, splendidly fashioned—and straightaway invited Poonguzhali's ire. She caught sight of the majestic beast trotting elegantly through the trees; annoyance flared up, and she hurled the stone at it.

The pebble found its mark upon the *rishabam*'s skull; the bull quivered for a moment—and its gaze settled squarely upon the direction of the hit.

"*Ayyo*, Poonguzhali—what've you done?" Amudhan demanded, alarmed. "How could you stone him?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"A pitiful, speechless creature that cannot even protect itself doesn't deserve such a treatment—"

"A pitiful, speechless woman from my family suffered too—but who will punish the ones responsible? She was defenseless as well; wasn't that the reason a prince ruined her life?"

"How's this bull responsible, pray, for what was done to your aunt?"

"It isn't as defenseless as you think, Amudha. Look at those sharp horns—the bull can use them to ram attackers and save itself but what about a poor, mute, deaf girl who knew nothing of the world? By God, I wouldn't spare a prince who used me that way—"

"Instead, you'd fling pebbles upon a bull—safe within a boat on the canal; it can't get at you here, can it?"

"If it can't take revenge upon me," Poonguzhali grinned impishly. "It can ram someone else, surely?"

"Just like you took out your anger on someone else, upon this bull?"

The *rishabam* was incapable of understanding this conversation, but it did take Poonguzhali's advice seriously—almost.

Unable to visit its anger upon the maiden in a boat, it leapt and bounded away in another direction, snorting.

Vanathi was walking all alone towards her palanquin at the outskirts of the grove, heart leaping with enthusiasm and her first instinct, upon sight of the *rishabam* bounding about, was one of glee—a glee that vanished the moment she took in the beast's furious mien—and changed to outright fright as the animal shook its large head, raised its tail and lowered its horns in her direction.

There seemed no option but to turn back and run in the direction of the banks and before she knew it, Vanathi was in the vicinity of the *Nandhi Mandapam*—but there she skidded to the stop, for the earth slid steeply down to the canal. Well, she would simply have to skirt the banks, to the *mandapam* … except that the *rishabam* was now very close; she had no choice but to edge backwards—and then fall headlong into the canal. It was then that the screams tore themselves from her throat: "*Ayyo*—*Akka*!"—screams that smote the ears of both Ponniyin Selvan and Kundhavai.

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Brother and sister turned instantly in the direction of the terrified shrieks. There! Upon the rising banks, at a little distance from where they sat appeared Vanathi, her back towards the canal. Her panicked expression clearly indicated that she was confronting some sort of appalling spectacle—and the object of her terror was apparent the next moment: *Mmmmaaaa*! The *rishabam* gave a majestic, ear-splitting roar as it emerged in front of her.

Another step—and Vanathi would crash into the canal! But there was nowhere else she could go, which Arul Varman understood the moment his sharp eyes gauged the scene.

The next instant he had bounded down the stairs of the *Nandhi Mandapam*, leaping into the canal and sprinting like lightning—arriving underneath just as Vanathi finally slipped off the banks, catching her in strong arms before she crumpled headfirst into the water.

Kundhavai felt her petrified heart skip several beats as she watched the danger about to envelope Vanathi—only to sink into a sea of relieved delight at the sight of her brother rescue the falling girl.

Arul Varman approached Kundhavai, cradling the slender, wilting vine of a maiden in hands toughened as Indra's famed *Vajrayudham* by years of wielding swords and spears. "Here's your precious friend, *Akka*," he said. "I wonder how the valiant Kodumbalur Velirs ever bore such a one? A mystery I can't unravel."

"*Thambi*!" Kundhavai feigned astonished horror. "To carry an unmarried woman thus? How could you dare touch a virgin?"

"Good God—is that a crime? Would you rather she'd tumbled into the canal and drowned? Thank heavens she fainted—as usual—even as she fell, so she'd no idea I'd caught her," grumbled Arul Varman. "Now take your friend, do."

A peal of merry laughter—and Vanathi slid neatly out of his arms and jumped onto the banks.

"Why, *kalli*—you little wretch!" Kundhavai exclaimed. "Were you awake all this time?"

"Ask her why she pretended to faint, *Akka*," demanded Ponniyin Selvan.

"I wasn't pretending at all," Vanathi retorted. "I couldn't stand the embarrassment of his touching me—so I shut my eyes tight."

"How was I expected to know that? Fainting at the slightest provocation is your friend's specialty, after all—"

"Not any more—and even if I do, never in his presence. But," Vanathi's eyes sparkled with mischief. "He ought not to forget the way I saved him, *Akka*."

"She *what*? What on earth —!" Arul Varman sputtered. "She's saved me, has she? Well, that's good hearing!"

“What’s this you say?” Kundhavai herself seemed nonplussed. “You mean to say that my brother rescued you, surely?”

“Not at all, *Akka*. I meant what I said—I’ve rendered him a signal service today, and he ought to be grateful forevermore.”

“*I’m* supposed to thank her for having saved her from a tumble into the canal?” Ponniyin Selvan blinked. “Your friend hasn’t added lunacy to her long list of accomplishments, has she?”

“My wits are in fine fettle—it’s his that are scrambled. Fair enough, I’ll explain myself: *Akka*, you’ve described how your brother fell into the Kaveri once and was saved by a woman. And then, he fell into the sea recently—and who should come to his rescue once again, but a boat-girl? All I can say is, it’s become a habit for him to be saved by a succession of females—and I did my best to wipe out that stain upon his name.” Vanathi peeped from underneath her lashes. “Haven’t I conferred upon him the phenomenal honour of having saved a woman about to fall into the canal? And so, don’t I deserve his undying gratitude?” She chuckled.

Kundhavai began to laugh … and Ponniyin Selvan, having tried unsuccessfully to stifle his amusement, finally burst into an appreciative guffaw. Sheer exhilaration flowed from the *mandapam*; waves of mirth swept out, echoing to the very heavens —

— an echo that reached the duo in the boat as well.

“Hear those lunatics giggling, Amudha?” Poonguzhali chuckled, and Amudhan joined in her laughter.

Kikkilu—kilukilu! Birds roosting in the coconut grove chirped and twittered, infected by mirth, and the *raja rishabam*, still tarrying along the banks delivered a *harrumph*! of amusement before trotting away.

In the distance, waves crashed upon the shore, bellowing with laughter, while even the sea breeze fluttered pleasantly over land, gurgling gently with merriment.

BOOK 3 CONCLUDED

About Kalki R Krishnamurthy

Most men manage to embrace a single vocation in their lifetime—but very few are successful in what they have chosen to do with their life. Even among these, Kalki Ra Krishnamurthy was something of a rarity, for he managed to be a freedom- fighter, a talented writer, traveller, poet, journalist and a veritable connoisseur of the fine arts. He formed a part of the elite breed of writers who could churn their reader's emotions with their passionate words, or rouse them to wrath with powerful expressions.

Born on September 9, 1899, in the village Buddhamangalam, in the Thanjavur District, to Ramaswamy Iyer and Thaiyal Nayaki, Krishnamurthy, as he was named, began his earliest studies in the local school, later pursuing his education in the Hindu Higher secondary school. His thirst for literature became evident at this stage, for he began to write short stories and essays, under the able tutelage of his Tamil professor, Periyasamy Pillai.

1921 saw the launch of the Non- Cooperation Movement by Mahatma Gandhi, to which Krishnamurthy, like thousands of other students, responded in earnest by giving up his education and participating in the fight for freedom from the British Raj. In 1922, he was awarded the sentence of one year in prison, during which time he met two people who would provide him with encouragement and enthusiasm all his life: T. Sadasivam and C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji). It was during his imprisonment that he produced his first novel, *Vimala*.

During October, 1923, he ascended to the post of Sub-editor in a Tamil periodical, *Navasakthi*, edited by eminent Tamil scholar and veteran freedom-fighter, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundaram, otherwise known as Thiru. Vi. Ka. The next year saw his marriage to Rukmini, while he translated Gandhiji's *My Experiments with Truth* into the famed *Sathya Sothanai*. He also published his first collection of short stories, titled *Sarathaiyin Thanthiram* (Saratha's Strategy). In 1928, he walked out of *Navasakthi*, and engaged in the freedom movement in earnest. Living for the next three and a half years in Gandhiji's Ashram, he was a part of the

magazine *Vimochanam* (Release) edited by Rajaji, and it was from this period that his writing skills began to come to the fore. With Rajaji banished to prison, Krishnamurthy wrote rousing essays and short pieces in the magazine, for which he paid the price—another term of imprisonment for six months in September, 1930. Released on March 19th the next year, he took over the editorship of *Ananda Vikatan*, a humour weekly which was swiftly ascending to popularity. From this period, his popularity increased phenomenally.

Writing under the pen-names 'Kalki', 'Tamil Theni', 'Karnatakam' etc. his witty, precise and impartial essays attracted readers of all walks. His novels and short stories appeared as serialized versions in the magazine, among them, notably *Kalvanin Kadhali* (The Bandit's Beloved) in 1937, which happened to be his first novel, followed by *Thyaga Bhoomi* (The Land of Sacrifice), both of which were made into movies. In 1941, he left Ananda Vikatan to start his own magazine, *Kalki*, in which T. Sadasivam was instrumental.

He wrote *Parthiban Kanavu* (Parthiban's Dream) during this period, one of his first forays into novels based on a historical setting, with members of the Pallava and Chozha Dynasty as its principal characters. In 1944, *Sivakamiyin Sabadham*, one of the best historical novels ever to have been written in Tamil was produced, for which Kalki (by which name he styled himself) journeyed to Ajantha and Ellora, so as to add the touch of realism and precision. He also wrote the screen-play for the hit-movie *Meera* starring M.S. Subbulakshmi, the legendary Carnatic singer. 1948 saw the start of *Alai Osai*, a novel set in the era of freedom-fighters, discussing the then political and social situation, and was considered by Kalki to be his best. It won for him the Sahitya Academy Award, posthumously. In 1950, he journeyed to Sri Lanka, which formed the base for his magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan*, which, according to many, has none to equal its stature as a superb Tamil historical novel till date.

Kalki performed many roles with consummate ease during his lifetime; he wrote stirring novels which explored human relationships and social conditions, subjects considered largely taboo in those days, for society was, in general, above criticism and history largely confined to schoolrooms. His writings were in simplified chaste Tamil, so that they would reach a multitude. He was one of the first writers to add a large humour quotient in his writings—at a time when many authors

considered humour beneath their dignity or were unable to project it into their works, Kalki used wit to deliver his sharpest snubs and most pointed criticisms. The effort, not unnaturally, made friends for him even among those he sought to criticise. At a point when the self-esteem of the Tamil population was at its lowest ebb and honour, to most, consisted of identification with the British regime, Kalki strove to bring Tamil Nadu's rich history and culture into focus—he was largely responsible for tearing away the cloak of convention around Bharathanatyam, and made it accessible to the common public. Until that time, it had largely been left to the devices of courtesans, and learning it was not considered proper by the general public. Kalki brought the understanding that the Tamil population had plenty to be proud of.

Kalki relished travelling—his love for the Tamil countryside, its people, the language and their customs can be found in abundance in almost all his works. He was one of the first authors to promote research and precision in writing, for he actually visited many of the places mentioned in his novels and short stories.

As a freedom-fighter, he was among the most respected in the country—he did much to rouse the people from their self-imposed lethargy and diffidence. Occasional periods of imprisonment did nothing to extinguish his fervour—he made more friends who were willing to join hands in his quest, and his popularity increased.

Small wonder, then, that he is revered by many to be a veritable Leonardo Da Vinci of Tamil Nadu—for he managed to accomplish much with little.

About Pavithra Srinivasan

Pavithra Srinivasan is a writer, journalist, artist, translator, columnist and editor – not necessarily in that order. She is fascinated with History, and writes children's fiction in The Hindu. She's also an organic farmer and lives in her farm in Thiruvannamalai District, Tamil Nadu, where taps are still seen as luxury items. She has to her credit two collection of historical short-stories for young adults, *Yestertales* (Vishwakarma Publications, 2017); *Little-Known Tales from Well-Known Times: Back to the BCs,* (Helios Books, 2012); two historical novellas *Swords and Shadows* and ***I, Harshavardhana*** (Pustaka Digital Media, 2016); the translation of Kalki's epic historicals, *SivakamiyinSabadham* (Helios Books, 2012, Tranquebar Press, 2015) and *PonniyinSelvan*, (Tranquebar Press, 2014); *Lock-up: Jottings of an Ordinary Man* (Tranquebar Press, 2017) – the novel on which the National Award winning movie *Visaranai* was based. She has translated Jeffrey Archer's short-story collection into Tamil, *MudiviloruThiruppam* (Westland, 2009) as also Amish Tripathi's acclaimed *Shiva Trilogy* (Westland, 2014, 2015), and *Scion of Ikshvaku* (Westland, 2016). Book 2, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (Westland, 2018) is currently under production.

Pavithra is a miniaturist – an artist who draws miniatures. Her work has been featured in The Hindu, Deccan Chronicle, and AvalVikatan. To get regular updates about her work, check out her Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/pavithra.srinivasan

Translator’s Note

As a twelve-year old reading *Ponniyin Selvan* for the first time, the female characters naturally attracted my attention (what was left after endless fascination with Arulmozhi Varmar and Vandhiyathevan, of course)—and amongst them, Kundhavai Devi was easily my favourite. Similarity of tastes in swooning over Arulmozhi aside, I could never really identify with Poonguzhali (though I did envy her spirit) or Vanathi (who was too much of a wilting wallflower with apparently no mind of her own.) Kundhavai, though, was everything I, stepping across the fragile line dividing childhood and maidenhood aspired to be: poised, intelligent, blessed with incredible strength of character and a deep, abiding love for her younger brother—a love that would eventually shape his destiny as Emperor.

For all this, however, I couldn’t help feeling a sneaking sympathy for poor Vanathi at times—a sympathy that I would realize, later, was founded upon one shared trait: extreme anxiety and panic attacks.

[Spoiler: Chapter 23 of Book 3 in this epic saga is where you receive a few insights into the Kodumbalur princess’s character.]

The wheres and whys of Vanathi’s extreme terror apart, there’s a rather unique mechanism she uses to keep her panic at bay: creative fancies of an imaginary child. Hours are spent in delightful daydreams about an accomplished warrior-son who would love and cherish his mother, proving an able shield to her frightened, sorrowful self. He would guard her, soothing her hurt, lonely heart with his company. He would care for her to the exclusion of everyone else. He would be her strong, capable, invincible armour against the oppression of the outside world, and the depression of her inner world.

So too did I seek an armour, a shield, a safe place that would offer protection. What was a son for Vanathi, proved to be the book *Ponniyin Selvan*, for me.

My childhood hadn't exactly been a bed of roses but innocence protected me somewhat... until I turned fifteen. And then, it was as though the entire universe pledged to make my life miserable: my health took a nosedive; family issues threatened to overturn the existing, fragile balance and finance underwent unexpected, brutal reverses. Despite my parents' efforts to shield me from the worst of it (especially my mother, who bore the brunt of the strain), I couldn't but share the pain—as an only child, not only did I have no buffer, but I'd also been taught to shoulder my share of the family's burden. But there were moments when it got too much. I was so physically weak that I began to suffer palpitations; severe anemia lead to vertigo, and the depression was horrendous. Mood swings attacked me for no reason whatsoever—for example, out of 3000 students at my school, I'd been chosen, via audition, to be part of an exclusive thirty-two-strong choir … but I was miserable. By rights, I should've been wildly happy at the honour, but I was so terrified I threw up. My work suffered; my friends were often puzzled with my irrational misery.

It was *Ponniyin Selvan* that came to my rescue. Tired of being depressed and yearning for something else to focus on, I dived into Kalki's marvellously lifelike tenth century world again and again—a world of charismatic heroes; princes with destinies; plots; dark palaces; conspiracies; intelligent, stunningly beautiful women and a history that produced awe. I could never hope to visit the places mentioned in the novel (at that point) but it was enough that they existed somewhere in Tamil Nadu—and even more important, the source of all this happiness; this amazing, wonderful repository of awesome writing was all contained in five luscious volumes. Volumes that I could hold and immerse myself into, by just flipping open the cover. But only at home. What was I supposed to do at school?

So I bundled all five bulky books, their bindings falling apart; the fragile, yellowing papers coming loose—into my tattered schoolbag. Every single day, all through Class X, *Ponniyin Selvan* accompanied me to school; those books took my hand, helping me cross miserable lessons; mulish friends and dark, dark moments. I never read them during school hours, but just the thought that they were all there, within hand's reach if I should need them, was reassuring. Vandhiyathevan and Kundhavai with their delicate, touching romance; Arulmozhi with his fantastic daydreams; quirky, independent Poonguzhali; loving

Manimekalai and fiery, desolate Nandhini were by my side. Even frightened Vanathi and morose Pazhuvettarayar kept sharing their stories during recesses; between periods, and over lunch. And they were a comforting weight as I trudged home from school. Yes, the volumes nearly bent my back. Yes, my mother railed and ranted at my obsession and tried her best to wean me from my habit. But I persisted. Flickering torches in gloomy Pazhuvoor vaults; secret conspiracies in Kadambur palaces, cunning Kaalaamukars, wily Vaishnavites and staunch princesses drew me from my misery; showed me that there was still a world of colour and adventure outside my own drab, grey inner life.

Bit by bit, I made it out. I climbed laboriously out of a hellhole, finally finding myself in the bright sunshine of the real world. My marks improved; so did my health. And although I've crossed other, far bitter, miserable periods later, never again was I as lonely as I'd been, at 15.

Neither was I as dismissive of Vanathi's fancies and misery, for I knew that she'd simply sought a crutch—just as I did. Her gentle melancholy touched a chord deep within. She'd never be my favourite, but I understood her.

And my respect for Kalki, who'd visualized and developed such a character, grew by leaps and bounds. I found myself revisiting the volumes at different periods in my life and realized that each character was as nuanced … and it only gets better from this point.

In my personal opinion, it is from Book 3 that *Ponniyin Selvan*, cruising gently until then, really takes off. Events occur swiftly; decisions —irrevocable, often—are made in moments—and the journey towards everyone's final destination is set in motion. In between the packed action there's plenty of drama; romance, emotion and character development to satisfy the most critical reader.

There are lessons too; lessons that stick to you through life, forming the backbone of adult decisions –like becoming a historical fiction writer —when you realize, suddenly, the depth of the book's impact.

And here I am now, with the incredible good fortune of being able to translate it into English. The best works, they say, are a labour of love—

and if ever there was a labour wrought of love, it’s this one. I hope you enjoy reading it just as much as I enjoyed translating it.

Pavithra Srinivasan,

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Chennai.